

TRANSFORMATIONS IN ACADEMIC PUBLISHING

John B. Thompson. *Books in the Digital Age: the Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Publishing in Britain and the United States*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005. Pp. 468. \$29.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Amy Bickett, Clemson University

Since the late 1980s, the digital revolution has promised to bring profound change to the publishing industry. Individual presses, from the profit-driven mega-corporations to the non-profit university presses, began to feel immense pressure to invest their resources in new technologies, to experiment in new methods of production and forms of output so that they would not be left behind by competitors in their respective fields of interest. No one could be sure how technology would affect the future of publishing, but there was some speculation that the e-book business would soon render obsolete the physical, printed book. “By the end of 2001,” though, “the much heralded e-book revolution had faltered—it was beginning to look like one of those technological revolutions that had failed,” says John B. Thompson, and the extent of the effects of digitization on publishing remained uncertain, as it still does (1). With the aid of hindsight, however, it is evident that most if not all publishing fields have undergone significant transformations within the last few decades. While some of these transformations have involved the adoption of new technologies, Thompson argues in this book that many of the significant changes in publishing were instead brought about by trends peculiar to individual publishing fields—trends independent of digitization. In order to understand best the implications of the digital revolution on publishing fields, he suggests, it is necessary to understand first the “structure and evolution of the fields” within which different types of publishers operate (438).

While Thompson begins with an analysis of the characteristics of English language publishing in general, he gradually narrows his focus to the fields of academic and higher education publishing. He discusses publishing in the United Kingdom as well as in North America, but this review will outline Thompson’s analysis of publishing in the United States and particularly that of American academic publishing as represented by the university press. Academic publishing is that field or concentration of publishing undertaken mostly by university presses. What Thompson describes as higher education publishing is dominated by commercial presses, although university presses have established a significant presence in the field as they have sought to bring in increased revenue.

The most significant distinction between academic and higher education publishing before the mid-1980s lies in the form of output resulting from publication efforts: in academic publishing, the scholarly monograph, and in higher education publishing, the text book. While the demand for text books has grown in the last several decades as a result of increasing enrollment in American colleges and universities (making higher education publishing economically attractive), the demand for the scholarly monograph has drastically declined—so much so as to cause a complete restructuring of the academic publishing field.

Thompson traces the growth and subsequent decline of the monograph to provide



a context for the evolution of the field of academic publishing. Concurrent with the initial expansion in the number of American universities in the 1950s and 1960s was the building of more university libraries. Increased acquisitions budgets for these and other already-existing university libraries—made possible by increased government investment in higher education—fueled the demand for monographs and other scholarly content. Circa 1970, however, as a result of weakening economic conditions and the decreased flow of government funding to universities, the increase in demand for scholarly monographs began to plateau and then fall off. By the 1980s, many university libraries had been or were beginning to experience pressure on their budgets for new acquisitions as the universities themselves, particularly ones dependent on public funding, found their budgets squeezed. Thompson cites three reasons for the “so-called ‘crisis of the monograph,’” the first and most important being the financial constraints placed upon libraries in universities nationwide starting around 1970 (98).

The second factor precipitating the decline of the monograph was the growing proportion of expenditures for periodicals out of the whole acquisitions budget for libraries. This increased spending was brought about by the growth in volume and cost of journal content. In addition to the general rise in cost of printed journals, the consolidation in the field of journal publishing also put pressure on library budgets. A small number of publishers came to control a large proportion of academic journal titles, putting “them in a position of considerable strength when it comes to determining price increases and negotiating with libraries and library consortia” (100). Electronic delivery of journal contents also put librarians in a difficult position financially; they were (and are) sometimes forced to pay high fees for a bundle of journals, only a few of which they deem useful to their users. Hence, librarians find themselves in a situation beyond their control, “caught between the needs of faculty members to have access to journal content, on the one hand, and the increasing prices of journal publishers, on the other, and at the end of the day they may have little option but to pay the increasing fees” (99).

As a result of the increasing funds spent on journal content, the proportion of the acquisitions budget left for the purchase of monographs was been further restricted. Also tightening the budget for monographs is the growth in spending by libraries on information technology services and content in electronic formats. “Once librarians had begun to subscribe to these electronic resources, they found it difficult to pull back—‘they’re quit addictive,’ explained one librarian interviewed by Thompson. ‘You cut LexisNexis and everybody will scream’” (103). Though some of the costs for new technologies are non-recurrent, such as spending on computer equipment or training technical staffs, spending on web-based citation indexes, bibliographical resources, and a growing range of databases occurs on a regular basis, occupying an often substantial proportion of library budgets.

University libraries constitute the principal market for scholarly monographs and, consequently, the future of the scholarly monograph lies partially in its hands. The minimization of budgets and increased expenditure on journals and technology services in university libraries has created a downward pressure on the sale of scholarly books. Needless to say, university presses were faced with a financial dilemma as monograph sales declined, and many became increasingly anxious as they received additional pressure from their host institutions to become financially independent. As it was, only a handful of American university presses had the accumulated resources to maintain a substantial margin on sales;

many presses, on the other hand, even with the aid of subsidization, operated on a break-even basis. “It [had been] commonly assumed that the university presses would require subsidies and support of various kinds from their host institutions and from benefactors, since a good deal of what they published was the kind of scholarly work that would not be taken on by commercial presses,” Thompson says (108). However, in the 1970s and 1980s, many university presses, particularly public ones, were told by their host institutions that that they would have to become at least partially financially independent.

Financial pressures forced university presses to re-evaluate their practices if they wished to stay alive. They found themselves faced with two conflicting goals: the desire to continue publishing high-quality scholarly work which “reflects and contributes to the standing of the university as a centre of research and excellence” and the need to attain a higher degree of financial independence (109). According to Thompson, these goals were irreconcilable:

[G]iven the deterioration in the market for scholarly books, the expectation that university presses should contribute to the symbolic capital of the university while making little or no demand on its economic capital was unrealistic. Something had to give. Either the presses had to persuade their host institutions to continue to support them [...] or they had to find other ways of generating cash (for example, by shifting the emphasis of their publishing programmes towards more lucrative fields of publishing. And in many cases they had to do both. (109)

Attempting to increase their revenue, then, university presses had to explore seven “themes,” as Thompson calls them (111). He discusses seven of these strategies, including the “reduction of costs” involved in the publishing process, the “increase of prices, changing publishing strategies, greater selectivity in title acquisition and list-building, growth of marketing concerns, changing organizational cultures, [and] diversification and field migration” (112).

These interconnected themes have each played a pivotal role in transforming the operations of university presses, but consideration and implementation of the last theme—diversification and field migration—has especially shaped the direction of university presses by virtue of altering the foci of their publishing efforts. For every field into which university presses have ventured in order to diversify their list of publications (thereby taking pressure off of the monograph), new strategies of production and marketing have necessarily been learned. Each of these fields comes with their own organizational cultures and practices unique to what Thompson refers to as the “logic of a field.” University presses chose to diversify their lists by moving into fields that overlap somewhat with the logic of the academic publishing field, so while transitions into different fields were not *always* successful, for many of the university presses, they were.

There are three fields adjacent to academic publishing in which a significant number of university presses have met some success: textbook publishing, academic-trade publishing, and regional publishing. Certain university presses have gained a reputation for the quality of their output in these areas, usually within niche publication in a field, since the commercial corporations have the resources to dominate areas which generate the highest



revenue. The primary goal of university presses, however, has never been to establish an economic empire, but to serve the academic community through the dissemination of high-quality scholarly works.

This goal, however, has come to be interpreted quite differently by university presses and by the academic community, creating an on-going tension with no simple solution. Over the last few decades, university presses have decreased their publication of monographs, practicing increasing selectivity with those that they do publish and having to reject many high-quality monographs in favor of publishing in fields which have proven to be more reliable in terms of profit. At the same time, though, from the perspective of the academic community, the importance of monograph publication has multiplied as competition for tenure in academia has intensified.

Increasingly, young academics rely on university presses to publish their books in order to secure tenure and promotion in the academic field. Thompson argues, though, that members of the academic world at large must realize that the transformation which university presses have undergone in order to survive make it impossible for all deserving academics to be published. Thus, he suggests, the criteria for awarding tenure or promotion must be reconsidered. Additionally, Thompson warns, academics should re-evaluate the degree of support they provide to the university press if they expect it to be able to continue disseminating their scholarly works in the future.

Having discussed the evolution of academic publishing for a substantial part of *Books in the Digital Age*, Thompson's analysis of the effects of digitization in the field is dwarfed in comparison, the scale of which coincides with his argument that developments in technology play only a small part in the overall transformation of academic publishing. Thompson offers two separate discussions of the effects of the digital revolution on academic publishing, the first focusing on experimentation with the publication of digital content.

He offers three reasons why academic publishers sought to experiment in electronic publishing besides not wanting to be left behind by competitors. First, there was the hope that publishing scholarly books online would "become a new source of revenue, and eventually a profitable and financially self-sustaining operation" (331). Second, some academic publishers hoped that electronic publishing would provide a solution to the difficulties of monograph publishing—perhaps online publication of the monograph would decrease the costs of production and that the financial risks of unsold stock would be eliminated. A third hope for electronic publishing is that it would "liberate the scholarly work from the constraints imposed by the medium of the printed book," allowing a text to be presented with no limitations on length or illustrations (two features which, if extensive, can prevent a book from being printed on the grounds that it will not be profitable enough to justify the cost of production) (332). In addition, an online text could be "supplemented with sound and streaming video," enhancing its overall value (332).

According to Thompson's analysis of experimentation in electronic publishing, however, most of these hopes have not been fully realized because electronic publishing has not proven itself to be as wildly successful as some had hoped. He does, however, derive two rather clear lessons from the results of these experiments. Crucial to the survival of an electronic publisher is the lesson that "the principal market for scholarly book content in electronic form is likely to be institutional rather than individual" (368). Moreover, rather

than assuming that sheer scale will attract readers to electronic content, it has proven most profitable “to treat individual books as part of a scholarly corpus or database which has scale, selectivity and focus” (369).

Many questions about the future of electronic publishing remain unanswered, such as “whether the development of scholarly corpora is best handled by publishers themselves or by third-party aggregators of content” or whether possible cannibalization of online texts remains a valid concern (369). These and many other issues will require much more time and experimentation to be resolved. However, as Thompson goes on to explain, there have been multiple obvious benefits of digitization that have not received much attention. These benefits have not occurred in the realm of digital publishing, but in various areas of book production, constituting a “hidden revolution” which is “not so much a revolution in the product as a revolution in the process” (405).

The digitization of the production process may be called “the rise of digital workflow” (406). One result of digitization occurred in the process of typesetting; the shift from the use of linotype machines to desktop publishing made typesetting much faster by eliminating the necessity of re-keying text. Desktop publishing reduced much of the work which had previously been required and thus decreased the cost of typesetting. Computer technology made many steps of the publishing process more efficient; among other things, it allowed for quick communication internally and externally, it enabled publications to be organized digitally and to be easily accessible for future use, and it reduced the steps involved in copy editing.

Technology has also transformed the printing process. The PDF, for example, significantly accelerated printing, as did the development of digital printing. Two printing options made available to publishers after the development of digital printing have “reinvent[ed] the life cycle of the book”—print on demand (POD) and short-run digital printing (SRDP) (432). POD and SRDP allow publishers (such as our own digital press) to keep slow-selling titles in motion, offering them the option of having one book or a small quantity of books printed so quickly and cheaply that they are able to maintain a profit margin.

Before the development of digital printing, printing a small order of books was unthinkable financially—the costs far outweighed sales with the use of traditional offset printing. Thus, titles that were not selling well were put out of print, remaindered, and, more often than not, were likely never to be printed again. Monographs were especially susceptible to such retirement as, even as front list titles, they sold in relatively small quantities. The printing process was risky since the quantity of books printed was always based on sales predictions; it was a gamble as to how many copies would actually sell, and unsold copies frequently constituted a significant financial loss for the publisher. However, POD and SRDP now eliminate financial risk tied up in unsold stock, enabling publishers or third-party companies to print small orders of books whenever they are needed.

The technological advancements most significant to the field of academic publishing, Thompson ultimately argues, are connected to the *processes* of publishing and not so much, at least thus far, to the publication of digital content. These advancements have sped up the process of production, cut costs in some areas, and enabled circulation of scholarly monograph content that previously had been determined financially unviable and therefore unprintable. These advancements have not solved the crisis of the mono-



graph, though, and it remains to be seen how university presses will cope with their need to simultaneously serve the needs of academia and sustain financial viability. Thompson makes it clear that several forces independent of technology have dramatically transformed the field of academic publishing and that technological transformations in the field have taken place within the context of this already changing field. It will take time, as well as further development and experimentation, to discern where the future of academic publishing is headed.