The Future of the Book: The Clemson Experience

By Wayne K. Chapman

First, let me thank Mark Herring for inviting me to speak to you this morning and my thanks, too, to the conference organizers, especially Yvonne Lev, Katina Strauch, and Regina Semko. The subject of this panel involves two topics, really: “the Future” and “the Book.” Since I’m not a clairvoyant, I’m going to stay on message about the book in the present—that is, on how it is defined and doing in practice at my little publishing house during an historically bad moment for universities and their presses. Also, since I’m neither an economist nor a pessimist, I assume the future will not look like the last three years at all times. Nevertheless, unless you haven't noticed, there is a revolution going on in the production and use of academic books by universities both as makers and consumers of books. An editor is obliged to see the course of change and, in a sense, to help chart it for the sake of literature broadly defined.

Three years ago, we wrote an institutional charter at Clemson University for the Center for Electronic and Digital Publishing (CEDP), laying the foundations for a digital press but acknowledging that profound disagreements were being voiced in the public debate on new media. For Winthrop University Libraries, Dean Herring was part of that debate. I asserted that three variables in criticism (text, author, context) are affected by the technological revolution and that all approaches to the study of literature so far devised are salient in some way and yet betray an interest in one or two of the three variables to the exclusion of one or both of the others. What has happened to the notion of the "definitive text"? Does criticism have the stuff to deal with global, not merely corporate, authority for texts produced collaboratively and read on the World Wide Web? Can texts be gendered if constructed globally and in more than one dimension? Literature, finally, does have something to do with texts and people who make them. So what will the future hold for students who experience their popular culture on the Internet? Texts, authors, contexts--energy, mass, the speed of light.
Trying to imagine what life will be like in the profession of literature in a few years and, consequently, in the classroom and the world of the publishing scholar/critic, I tell my students that we need a General Theory of Criticism like the General Theory of Relativity—a unified theory. I give them a humble kind of relativity, one not yet unified theoretically because of the need to work out how the fundamentals are changing.

Thus, reading is a different experience for us all today depending on the medium used, just as the writing process profoundly changed for my generation in the mid-1980s when word processors replaced typewriters almost overnight. What is happening to the dissemination of knowledge university’s produce in the book industry? It probably never occurred to Dr. Johnson that printed books, the great technological advance of the late middle ages as literacy increased with the rise of university education, might one day seem doomed. This perception is everyone’s problem in Academia right now, not just those of us in humanities. But solutions have been suggested. In the April 2001 issue of Harper's Magazine, Michael Korda put it bluntly: "The larger and more disturbing question is whether the book itself has a future" (84); envisioning ironic "salvation" in the technology that is threatening all but a few of the largest publishing syndicates, Korda thinks there is an "awesome potential" in electronic publishing to do "the whole business of scholarly publishing, and . . . of publishing first novels, poetry, and essays" that tend to sell in small numbers. This was good to read after Clemson had already set its course as a publishing house.

As editor of The South Carolina Review, one of the top collegiate literary journals in the country, I believe universities have prestigious traditions that they should and will maintain in spite of increasingly challenged times and the hard reality of the fiscal “bottom line.” As executive editor of Clemson University Digital Press, I direct a small, self-supporting academic press for the twenty-first century. There’s such a thing as being too small, I imagine, but I assure you that being self-supporting on grants, private gifts, subscriptions, sales, copyright fees, and such is a virtue difficult to overestimate when virtually everything else in the academy is being
cut. The University of Massachusett Press, for example, might not have felt the ax come down so heavily this past summer if it were not so conventional in this regard. Endurance, in the long run, will be for publish-ers who change their tactics to ensure the viability of their product in a “niche market.”

I like to say that we are prepared to follow the example of the smart mouse that survived the dinosaurs because we, too, are small and adaptive. We aim to meet high editorial standards commensurate with that of the Association of American University Presses (AAUP), and we are committed to a strategic plan that would obtain affiliate membership in that organization after publishing three monographs in each of three years. That is in addition to our journals, *The South Carolina Review* and *The Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal*. Our Mission Statement stipulates that as a trademark Clemson University Digital Press shall stand for “the best that has been built, created, performed, and written” in the “spirit and context of the university’s Guiding Principles,” on which we are annually assessed. “As a platform for collaboration with community outreach and educational goals inherent in its Mission Statement, CUDP satisfies the injunction of the definition to disseminate the fruits of research by invoking AAUP’s educational objective in a fundamentally practical way. Traditional and nontraditional modes of publication (including, especially, electronic and digital publication of refereed scholarship) [...] involve[s] the editorial and technical abilities of faculty and students in various graduate and undergraduate programs.” I should add that for every book we print it is our general policy to publish an e-book, a free edition on the Internet (in PDF or HTML format and appropriate links to sponsors, associated organizations, collections, and related works).

As a venture in public service publishing, the point is not business and profit, but the serendipitous and synergetic agency of individuals who collectively negotiate and, consequently, *make* books together. Technology is serving, not driving it. The medium is *not* the message, primarily. And teaching is as consequential as learning is to the process. Our students learn the drill and discipline texts and editors demand because an audience expects it; they also learn to apply in
the lab computer skills that they learn in the classroom as graduate students in one of two programs. As a member of the literature faculty and a hands-on editor, I teach modern literature and writing in the core curriculum and then give this kind of instruction in the direction of our publication program. I work with four part-time editorial assistants on our journals (two from the literature and two from the professional communication graduate programs), and I direct two MAPC graduate assistants employed by CEDP. In English the "tech line" is not the Maginot line. The CEDP and digital press are on it, the "new territory" of which our president speaks, and it is becoming more and more imperative for faculty, in general, to get on that line and to work both sides of it. In English, a territory where the arts and humanities regularly coalesce and synthesize, it's not about writing (or communication) and literature, but about writing literature.

I love books--as they have been; as they are, evolving in new media; and as they shall be in the future, in forms not mutually exclusive of one another but co-existential. My house looks like my office--I live with books. I love reading them, writing them, and making them. I can’t imagine living in a world without them, but an awful lot depends on how one defines the concept “book” and allows for it to take the form of the digital beside its familiar material manifestation. Directed at a niche market, one’s objective might sometimes be the book as we know it, but in-creasingly the imperative is for web-based book productions, to the good effect of keeping alive as an option the old book as well as the one that is emerging in digital editions and miniscule print runs on a demand basis. Thus, “the Book” is very much alive although the book trade in academia is not at all well.

Now that you've shaken hands with CEDP and the digital press, consider some of the shock-waves that information technology has been making in Academia these days. I give you a sampling of headlines from The Chronicle of Higher Education in the last couple of years:

* "Professors Should Embrace Technology in Courses" (D. Lynch). Sometimes professors don't; this is an article about intellectual property;

* "Does Technology Fit in the Tenure File?" (J. Young). On whether creation of scholarly
Web sites and electronic teaching tools should be counted in evaluation of faculty;

* "The Deserted Library" (Carlson). On students abandoning reading rooms to research online or study at Starbucks;

* “An Online Library Struggles to Survive” (Foster). Questia’s great expectations in for-profit services “hasn’t won over college librarians or scholars”;

* "Are University Presses Producing Too Many Series for Their Own Good?" (Waters). That is, niches are nice but narrower can be a nuisance;

* "Academic Press Gives Away Its Secret of Success" (Jensen). Or the logic of free online access to books to reduce the cost of marketing them;

* "Staying in Print: The Romance of the Literary Magazine” (Goldstein), by the editor of Michigan Quarterly Review, about preserving the “totems” of our cultural “zeitgeist, and I’d be a fool not to acknowledge a bias in favor of any English professor who doubles as editor of a literary journal; and

* (not least) ""Understanding the Economic Burden of Scholarly Publishing,” subtitled “The bottom line is that scholarly publishing isn’t financially feasible as a business model—never was, never was intended to be, and should not be” (Davidson).

That's a lot to think about. And I've given it to you in no particular order. Business and finance issues are there. Teaching and research issues are there for the faculty as well as for students. And service is there for the institution and for the editor who thinks "Audience, Audience, Audience" (Rabiner and Fortunato). For a university press, like a faculty, the challenge that technology offers is both demanding and essential, galvanizing and liberating, as Clemson President James Barker affirmed when he said: "We realize that we are in some new territory here and we like it. We like being in the new territory even though it’s confusing and we don't have all the answers yet." When AOL Time Warner decides to sell its problematic book division to settle debts (Klinkenborg), one might wonder why a university should wish to join in such “confusion”? The answer is that major research institutions shoulder a mission they cannot shirk. For that reason, production of printed
books in academic fields will be continued, primarily by universities themselves, for sake of the
dissemination of knowledge that the academy produces. Clemson University has developed a new
Academic Plan with intentions to invest substantially in Information and Communication Technol-
ogy as a focus area as soon as we come out of the negative growth pattern of the last three years
and, as expected by public universities in South Carolina, possibly not before another disappoint-
ing fiscal cycle in 2004-2005. To that extent, the dissemination of knowledge by a declining insti-
tutional subsidy—or “life support”—is a condition evident to us regionally, nationally, and globally. Still, I wager that the situation will change before too long. The history of the book, after all, is measured in centuries and millennia.

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