# Monographs Adrift.

Par Lorri Hagman

## The situation.



The cycle of knowledge production depends on a symbiotic relationship among academics, publishers, distributors, librarians, and users who build on and challenge present and past knowledge to forge new knowledge. As an editor who acquires scholarly book manuscripts in the Usa, I have watched this cycle become alarmingly dysfunctional in recent years, although the roots of the crisis go back several decades—to a decline in library budgets (the largest portion of which is now spent on high-priced journals, not books), dominance of the retail market by large chain bookstores, and diminishing institutional support.

Historically, such knowledge production has relied on *published* material, which differs significantly from drafts circulated directly by authors: it has been peer reviewed to validate content, developed editorially to achieve maximum clarity of language, designed and formatted for users' convenience, publicized to make its

existence known broadly to potential users and to review media that will further validate quality, and made available on a stable, ongoing basis to individuals, libraries, and booksellers. University tenure and promotion committees demand this kind of formal publication, often (especially in the humanities) in printed, book-length format.

## The problem.

Users are not buying monographs in quantities sufficient for publishers to recover the publication cost of these labor-intensive products. As sales fall, publishers print fewer copies, to avoid tying up capital in books that will only gather dust in warehouses. When print runs fall, unit prices (and the list prices paid by consumers) rise, as total publication costs are spread across fewer copies. This further discourages sales and drives unit prices even higher.

There are many reasons for the challenges facing the wider book industry—shifts in technology, the need to accommodate electronic formats, and competition from content created or re-circulated by amateurs (e.g., *Wikipedia*, news blogs). But scholarly publishers face the additional dilemma of being expected to continue publishing books by and for academics that are not buying enough of these books to keep the cycle of knowledge production alive. Academic publication requirements are anachronistic, having arisen in an age when fewer scholars wrote fewer books, and libraries purchased more of them. In this new economic landscape, the academy needs to ask itself what the practical purpose of monograph publication is. Is it to facilitate the process of a scholar's learning to develop a long, complex argument? to subject a scholar's work to the scrutiny of peer review? to add value through professional editorial improvement? to bring the work to the attention of other specialists? to garner further commentary and validation in the form of published book reviews? to create texts for use in teaching the next generation of scholars? It may be that not all of these functions need to be handled by monographs all of the time. Certain types of content, such as the revised dissertation, may rarely merit publication in book form.

Online publication is often mentioned as a solution to the crisis of the monograph, but switching to electronic formats saves little, as the cost of printing a book represents only a small fraction of its cost. Most of the cost of publication is in editorial development, copy-editing, proofreading, design, typesetting, marketing, and business operations, which are constant whether the product is printed on paper or delivered electronically.

## Our challenge.

By definition, scholarly books are specialized and have markets too small to interest commercial publishers, but they can succeed if selected carefully and developed wisely. If monograph publication is to survive, academic tenure and promotion practices must be realigned with real-world business models, recognizing that publication isn't free, or an end in itself. The academy—meaning academic authors themselves, along with department chairs, deans, and administrators who set policy—must either align publication practices with the marketplace or devise methods of routinely subsidizing publication in the way that other educational processes are supported. Publication should be reserved for content and formats that require distribution beyond a small circle of experts.

Value is added by all specialists in the knowledge-production cycle. We share interests and goals, and need to work together to improve scholarly communication and make it economically sustainable. We need new processes that can accommodate technological and economic shifts, and we need to reconsider the relationship of content to form. Dynamic conversations have already begun within and across universities and across a spectrum of interests and professions, as we strive to understand one another's practices and realize the value of collaboration. We have much to learn from dialogue with fellow academics, as well as with professionals throughout the communications industry and the arts who are facing similar challenges.

Illustration: slworking2, "The American Flag atop Mt. Soledad", 11.3.2007, Flickr (Creative Commons license).

## Résumé

The situation.The cycle of knowledge production depends on a symbiotic relationship among academics, publishers, distributors, librarians, and users who build on and challenge present and past knowledge to forge new knowledge. As an editor who acquires scholarly book manuscripts in the Usa, I have watched this cycle become alarmingly dysfunctional in recent years, although the ...