

Ruminations about the Future of Dissertations in the Social Sciences

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Being no expert in graduate education, I propose to reason backwards from changes that I see in the arena of scholarly publications to possible implications for dissertations. I will focus on three changes of note– the apparent decline of the scholarly monograph, the apparent rise in journal publication, and the push toward data transparency and replicability or interpretability.

Most scholarly monographs have never sold in large numbers, but sales can now be ludicrously small. According to one expert, “a fair estimate would be that the average sale of a scholarly monograph has shrunk from 600-700 copies in the 1980s to 300-400 copies in 2007. . . . At the same time, sales of monographs to scholars and students have declined, although not to the same extent.”¹ The number of sales have arguably declined further since 2007. Speakers at an American Library Association forum in 2014 gave talks on “Monograph Collecting in Crisis: A Publisher’s View” (Michael Zaoli, from YBP Library Services), or observed that “for the last four years, sales have been flat or down for all publishers. E-book purchases had been increasing but now have plateaued. Smaller library budgets mean fewer cloth book sales, which are the most profitable. University presses face some unique issues, such as reduced funding from their home universities. . . . Another issue is fewer paperback sales to students” (Alex Holzman, Director of Temple University Press and president of the Association of American University Presses for 2008-9). A third speaker pointed to her library’s “low usage statistics for their print monographs” and the fact that it “has eliminated the traditional faculty-driven collection development for this format” (Julie Swann, Northern Arizona University). All three participants offered possible reforms or innovations, but Holzman concluded that “any solutions. . . are merely band-aids. The model of scholarly publishing must change to be sustainable.”²

If this rather dire picture is accurate and remains in place, there seem to be clear implications for dissertations that take the form of book drafts: arguably they will be even more difficult to publish, and eventually to reach an audience, than they are now. This change will affect the humanities the most, the natural sciences the least, and some but not all of the social sciences. At least along the dimension of book-to-article publications, the social sciences occupy a middle space; some disciplines such as anthropology and history look more like the humanities, while others such as economics, geography, demography, and psychology look more like the natural

¹Bill Harnum, “Reflections on University Press Publishing,” *Academic Matters*, April 9, 2009. <http://www.academicmatters.ca/2009/04/reflections-on-university-press-publishing/> Mr. Harnum is the former executive director of the University of Toronto Press.

² “PVLr Forum: What Drives Acquisitions in 2014?” *ALCTS News*, a publication of the American Library Association. n.d.; circa 2014. <http://www.ala.org/alctsnews/conf/mw14-pvlr-forum>

sciences.³ Political science and sociology are themselves mixed, with a range of modes of publication from political philosophy or ethnography (mostly books) to analyses of administrative data or surveys (mostly articles). Graduate students will therefore be more or less harmed by the decline in publication and sales of scholarly monographs depending on their discipline or subdiscipline – but none will be benefited, so far as I can tell.

A cautionary note: this scenario of “the death of the monograph” is contested by some experts. Richard Fisher, formerly Managing Director of Academic Publishing at Cambridge University Press, recently posted a blog asserting “whilst the sales and circulation of individual monographs were unquestionably challenged, there was no reason on earth why the supply of long-form research, properly written and professionally published, need dry up.” He pointed to technological innovations such as print-on-demand that have “prove[d] the monograph’s salvation,” as well as “the massive expansion in long-form research outputs of the past thirty years,” especially among young scholars (a.k.a. dissertation writers) around the world.⁴

Fisher also argued that “the publication format which seemed to have retained its circulation best of all, namely article publication in major humanities journals. . . , ought to be the aspiration for more scholars than seemed currently to be the case, and that an ever-increasing emphasis on books as the key to career and tenurial advancement was not, necessarily, doing the historical profession any great favors” (ibid, note 3.). If we expand his point beyond the humanities to the social sciences, that leads to my second observation, about the growth in journal publications.

According to one metric, “published article output has grown 3.5% to 4% per year since 1990,” due to both an increasing number of journals and an increasing number of articles in established journals. If the 124 members of the Association of Research Libraries’ purchases of journals is indexed at 100 in 1990, they bought 315 journal subscriptions on average by 2010 (these data

³ Exactly what disciplines are in the social sciences is contestable. Across 31 highly selective colleges and universities, history was a social science in 20 and in the humanities in 11; psychology was a social science in 23 and in the natural sciences in 8.

⁴ “Guest Post: Richard Fisher on The Monograph: Keep On Keepin’ On*, Part One,” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, Nov. 10, 2015. <http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2015/11/10/guest-post-richard-fisher-on-the-monograph-keep-on-keepin-on-part-one/>

Another blog post on Scholarly Kitchen argues that monograph publishing continues apace, but points to a

a crisis looming for the monograph that will make the current problems seem minor. Many monographs are now made available in both print and digital versions, each requiring payment. You can choose to purchase not the whole book but individual chapters in digital format. The monograph is the scholarly development of an argument over 250 pages or more, backed up by the careful use of evidence. The integrity of the book as a whole is why it plays such an important part in the process and communication of research. If people buy individual chapters that integrity is lost, and the monograph will go the way of the music album when iTunes facilitated purchasing of individual tracks. This is the real crisis looming for the monograph and it greatly worries me.

This is an important subject, and relevant to dissertation writers, but a bit too far afield to discuss here. The quote is by Geoffrey Crossick, and is in Alison Mudditt, “Age of Challenge and Opportunity: The HEFCE Report on Monographs and Open Access,” *Scholarly Kitchen*, October 19, 2015.

<http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2015/10/19/guest-post-alison-mudditt-interviews-geoffrey-crossick-on-an-age-of-challenge-and-opportunity-the-hefce-report-on-monographs-and-open-access/>

were not available for the social sciences only).⁵ Another analysis shows that “the growth rate for SSCI [Social Science Citation Index] for the period 1987–2006 has been found to be 1.6% per year . . . for All Sources and 2.0% per year . . . for Journal Articles. The corresponding doubling times are 44 and 37 years.” SSCI covered about 1700 journals in 1998 and 2700 in 2009, but the authors of this analysis doubt that SSCI coverage is complete. They also offer my favorite concluding paragraph: “These conclusions may not be helpful. It is not clear what should be done in the future.”⁶

That concluding paragraph seems right, at least for current purposes; I do not have good evidence on whether journal publishing in the social sciences is increasing at a faster rate than the number of social scientists writing dissertations, how that rise varies across disciplines and subdisciplines, how the rise in open access publishing affects access to journal slots for graduate students and junior faculty, how many of the new journals have peer review or other strategies for quality control, and so on. Perhaps some or all of this information exists, and it would be worth tracking it down in order to understand how journal publishing relates to the future of dissertations in social sciences.⁷ Here I can only offer three points: 1) journals do not seem to be declining in number or reach, as scholarly monographs perhaps are; 2) an increasing share of Ph.D. students, at least in political science, are aiming to publish articles out of their dissertation rather than a book; and 3) if electronic publication of articles goes in parallel with or substitutes for print publication, the content of dissertations may change substantially. Electronic publication could deepen the range and nature of evidence offered in a dissertation, to include everything from datasets to video clips, maps, interactive graphics, snatches of music, or taped speeches or interviews. Dissertations could also, however, become narrower in scope and content if articles increasingly substitute for books as the goal of a published dissertation.

My final issue with regard to the future of dissertations focuses on the increasing drive toward data transparency and replicability (or the interpretability of research evidence, to put the point in more qualitative-friendly terms). This is a highly controversial issue in political science at

⁵ Kent Anderson, “Have Journal Prices Really Increased Much in the Digital Age?” *Scholarly Kitchen*, Jan. 8, 2013. <http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2013/01/08/have-journal-prices-really-increased-in-the-digital-age/>
The original report that this blog summarizes appears to have been taken down from the Internet.

⁶ Peder O Larsen and Markus von Ins, “The rate of growth in scientific publication and the decline in coverage provided by Science Citation Index,” *Scientometrics*, September 2010. 84 (3): 575-603. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2909426/>

⁷ Other points worth pondering, although they do not related directly to the future of dissertations: the average number of citations per article from 2000 through 2010 in the social sciences other than economics was under 4 (“Citation averages, 2000-2010, by fields and years,” *Times Higher Education*, March 31, 2011. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/citation-averages-2000-2010-by-fields-and-years/415643.article>.

About a third of social science articles receive no citations in the first five years after publication, and 10 percent account for half of all citations after two years. Vincent Larivière, Yves Gingras, and Éric Archambault, “The decline in the concentration of citations, 1900–2007,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 2009. 60 (4): 858-862.

Arguably, we have too many rather than too few journal articles being published.

present, and I can talk more about the details at the meeting if others are interested.⁸ The issue has not reached into history or anthropology, so far as I know, and is becoming salient in psychology. (Sociologists have issued an exhortation but not a mandate for data transparency, and I don't know about economists).

Exactly what is required in order to comply with mandates for data, analytic, and production transparency is contested; some scholars also express a deeper epistemological concern that the move toward transparency and replicability is intended to impose an inappropriately rigorous, "scientific," model on all social science empirical research. Some graduate students and junior faculty welcome the engagement with other scholars that the move toward research transparency may entail. But many who do qualitative or ethnographic research perceive a serious chilling effect. They fear that they cannot promise confidentiality to interview subjects, that the tasks of making public their transcripts or field notes will be onerous and expensive, that they will need to release their evidence for others' use too soon, and that journal editors will reject qualitative work because they cannot devise clear rules about compliance. In my view these concerns are probably exaggerated, and the move toward transparency is likely to produce better research. But any disincentive to engage in qualitative research for a dissertation is worrisome. So the future of dissertations in some of the social sciences may reinforce a deeply destructive split between (high status and "rigorous") quantitative research and (low status and "soft") qualitative work.

Appendix

Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT): A Joint Statement by Political Science Journal Editors

In this joint statement, leading journals commit to greater data access and research transparency, and to implementing policies requiring authors to make as accessible as possible the empirical foundation and logic of inquiry of evidence-based research. Please visit dartstatement.org for more information

Transparency requires making visible both the empirical foundation and the logic of inquiry of research. We agree that by January 15, 2016 we will:

*Require authors to ensure that cited data are available at the time of publication through a trusted digital repository. Journals may specify which trusted digital repository shall be used (for example if they have their own dataverse). If cited data are restricted (e.g., classified, require confidentiality protections, were obtained under a non-disclosure agreement, or have inherent

⁸ I am attaching, as an appendix, the Journal Editors Transparency Statement (JETS) that editors of about 30 political science journals have agreed to; implementation began in 2015 but is not yet complete. For evidence on the controversy within political science, see the DA-RT website (<http://www.dartstatement.org/>) and Dialogue on DA-RT (<http://dialogueondart.org/>), which includes a petition signed by almost 1300 members of the American Political Science Association opposing implementation of the JETS principles in the near future.

logistical constraints), authors must notify the editor at the time of submission. The editor shall have full discretion to follow their journal's policy on restricted data, including declining to review the manuscript or granting an exemption with or without conditions. The editor shall inform the author of that decision prior to review.

*Require authors to delineate clearly the analytic procedures upon which their published claims rely, and where possible to provide access to all relevant analytic materials. If such materials are not published with the article, they must be shared to the greatest extent possible through institutions with demonstrated capacity to provide long-term access.

*Maintain a consistent data citation policy to increase the credit that data creators and suppliers receive for their work. These policies include using data citation practices that identify a dataset's author(s), title, date, version, and a persistent identifier. In sum, we will require authors who base their claims on data created by others to reference and cite those data as an intellectual product of value.

*Ensure that journal style guides, codes of ethics, publication manuals, and other forms of guidance are updated and expanded to include improved data access and research transparency requirements.