

## Close to a Deadlock?

### The issue of academic book publishing

**This is the edited version of the main part of a presentation given by Péter Inkei—in his capacity of Chief Editor of the Central European University Press—at the Academic Publishing Workshop and Roundtable at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) of the Justus-Liebig Universität Gießen, on 13 December, 2018**

Revolutionary innovations in the technologies of producing manuscripts and of turning them into books have led to an explosion of new titles. They number millions globally each year. Tens of thousands in this ocean represent books in English in the humanities and social sciences. The proliferation of new titles flooding the global market has resulted in the dramatic drop in the amount of copies of books sold— whether printed on paper or released in digital formats.

One driver of this congestion of academic titles is the prevailing model of higher education institutions. Universities have in the past decades increasingly converged to the North American pattern across the globe. The main feature of this model took shape over a hundred years ago, by adopting the principles laid down by Humboldt, who pioneered the close combination of higher education with research. In this sense universities are by definition also research institutions; professors are by definition also scholars; and scholars are distinguished by their publications, books primarily.

This model was born in an era when in the top 20-30 countries of the world the share of graduate citizens was closer to 1% than 5%, against our age when over 40% of young people participate in tertiary education in the European Union.

The flops in publishers' sales (which of course hurts authors as well) is also the result of the spectacular developments in the domain of academic libraries, especially in North America, the most decisive market of academic publishing. The advances in library technologies and logistics resulted in titles being available in ever growing number of outlets—based on smaller and smaller number of acquired copies. This consolidation of the library community is partly a measure of self-protection vis-a-vis the increasing waves of new titles, aggravated by the even faster growing subscription prices to journals and often facing stagnating or shrinking budgets.

Are we near an ultimate deadlock? Not necessarily. As we can see, information technologies have grown to handle billion-item-long tails of every sort, including, and eminently so, the global inventory of academic books. Authors are adapting to ever smaller print-runs of each new title and newcomers are increasingly guided towards open access edition, a model in which the cost of publication is recouped by upfront underwriting rather than via sales of copies.

Coming back to the issue of the expectations towards university lecturers, a further emancipation of digital books on the one hand and publishing in journals on another will ease the physical pressure of handling new titles—yet the mental pressure to publish books persists. Shall we see changes in the prevailing paradigm? A modified conception of the roles

of lecturers in tertiary education may bring about significant effects. This implies the acknowledgment that—with the exception of a few dozen—the great majority of universities are primarily institutions of education (with an important scholarly component), and members of the faculty are primarily educators (with connections to the world of research). Indicators of educational capacities may become more prominent and more sophisticated at assessing and credentialing professors. Teaching skills, mentoring and tutoring record, successes expressed by disciples' careers, pedagogical devotion, eventual innovative approaches and other features may receive greater weight. "Rate my professor" plebiscites can be one but obviously only a supplementary supply.

With regard to the scholarly dimension of professors' credentials, the length of publication lists may cease to be a decisive benchmark. (Many of the grand names are known by one outstanding master title where little matters how many "less successful" items surround it.) More qualitative characteristics of a person's scholarly achievements may come forward, such as identifying his or her most important research findings or propositions, records of academic cooperation and communication, and of course awards and other signs of recognition.

Most of the above affects "communication" and style and can be addressed by re-editing the "faculty and staff" or "people" pages of university websites. More substantial changes require, however, a modified conception of tertiary educators' careers, implying reformulation of the principles and criteria of their assessment and promotion.

By removing the "publish or perish" mantra from centre stage can we expect detectable relief both on the oversaturated academic book market and about the mental well-being of higher education professors.

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