How should we read a monograph?

Kathryn Sutherland offers some personal reflections on the academic book of the future

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Changes over recent decades in the production and status of the academic book or scholarly monograph bring into focus a range of issues affecting humanities disciplines and their associated institutions of libraries, academic publishers, and booksellers. Productivity is increasingly engineered and funded by research councils, with academic careers and promotion structures dependent on research awards and the books that emerge from them. Government Research Exercises – RAE and REF – incentivise book production; they also downgrade it: in the latest REF a book weighed in as equivalent to two articles. More books from each academic career often means more narrowly focused topics, an effect mirrored in the output of major monograph publishers like Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Routledge/Taylor & Francis, Palgrave, for whom more titles translate into individually reduced print runs. A recent development is the move by some publishers to commission short-form monographs (for example, Palgrave Pivots). At the same time, proliferating titles are meeting library budgets heading in the opposite direction. So far, there has been no significant digital transformation of the academic book (aside from some cautious investment in digital scholarly editions). Most academic books continue to be produced as hard copy, but because libraries with their dwindling budgets represent the biggest fixed costs within Higher Education a new model is attractive.

There is a tacit understanding among funders and research councils that the solution to the present situation is open access and that open access means digital monographs. Humanities scholars already benefit from the huge cultural investment in digitising our older print heritage. Online catalogues and online journals are now the norm; so too are vast text repositories: Early English Books Online, Eighteenth-Century Collections Online, and above all Google Books. With astonishing speed (in little more than a decade) we have shifted the library from a physical space to a virtual environment, and from local institutional support, provided by human experts, to the Internet and a search engine. Humanities scholars have become sophisticated users of digital resources. Digitisation has brought back to life much dead print: historic newspapers, for example. The great swathes of Victorian newsprint unread for over a century

and now available online are reordering the priorities of many graduate students and early career academics and, in turn, altering the contours of humanities scholarship. There are compelling professional reasons why it now makes sense to write a doctoral thesis or first book on occasional political poems by shoemakers published in the Chartist press between 1835 and 1842 rather than a study of Tennyson's poetical form or George Eliot's contribution to the realist novel.

There have been noticeable shifts in my own discipline of English Studies towards the obscure and the superficial; on the one hand, a kind of neo-antiquarianism, characterised by anecdote and snippets of fascinating and esoteric information, chosen as often for its singularity as for its capacity to engage wider debate or communal assent; on the other, sociologies of literature that reject sustained interpretation in favour of description, documentation, and 'flat' reading practices, recently summed up as 'close but not deep criticism'.[1] Both approaches, the esoteric and the sociological, distinguish themselves from older humanistic models of close reading; both find sustenance in digital techniques of data mining and attest in different ways to the decentring of the human within the humanities – the rise of anti- and post-humanist literary studies – as consequences of widened digital access.

Digitisation has the potential to alter profoundly the ways we interact with and carry forward our textual heritage. This has less to do with a print/electronic divide and more to do with a text/data divide. It is an odd thing to say that, with such vast reserves of our textual heritage revivified in the electronic environment, the humanities model of research may be at risk, but I suspect it is. It is unfashionable to suggest that the future of the humanities is bound up with the culture of the book, but I think it is. It may seem perverse to argue that if our textual heritage or backlist is digital there are good reasons for keeping some at least of our present contributions as print, but I think we should.

One hundred years ago, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 30 November 1916, Virginia Woolf distinguished between 'learning' and 'reading'. 'Learning', she argued, drives out 'reading':

> Let us begin by clearing up the old confusion between the man who loves learning and the man who loves reading, and point out that there is no connexion whatever between the two. A learned man is a sedentary, concentrated, solitary enthusiast, who searches through books to discover some particular grain of truth upon which he has set his heart. If the passion for reading conquers him, his gains dwindle and vanish between his fingers. A reader, on the other hand, must check the desire for learning at the outset; if knowledge sticks to him well and good, but to go in pursuit of it, to read on

a system, to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading.

We are regularly told that 'information wants to be free', an appealing ideology of apparent individual empowerment (in fact, a form of data grabbing by big companies) that has all kinds of legal, political, economic, moral, and cultural implications. The atomisation of our heritage texts into information records within relational databases interrogated by powerful search engines seems to offer one particular freedom – from print – and in so doing to disentangle through technology the perennial struggle between learning and reading. As Woolf implied, this goal is not worth the gaining. In mining data and in the increasingly instrumentalist agendas imposed by policy-makers on our disciplines, we jeopardise the human and humane perspectives at the heart of the humanities. It is a matter of scale, of closeness of encounter, of difficulty and obstacles too easily overcome, of reflection.

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The context of the Academic Book of the Future project is one of rapid change (and anxiety about change): change in the educational landscape in the UK and elsewhere, change in academic career and promotion structures, change in the funding models for education, change in technology. In all this world of change, there is a temptation to think that one model should fit all; that the prompt to complementary thinking provided by the 'both'/'and' resources of our present hybrid knowledge ecosystem of material books, ebooks, digitised databases, and collaboration tools is a transient state that should and must fall away. I am not convinced. Much current open access evangelism makes the false assumption that we can extrapolate a model that will work for the book from the model that works well for the journal article.

In his 2015 report on *Monographs and Open Access*, carried out for HEFCE, Professor Geoffrey Crossick argued that while open access may solve issues of accessibility and enhanced interaction, the technology, the licences, and the business models are not yet in place to make it work for books. Who will take the lead – technology companies, publishers, academic libraries – in developing platforms? Should we care? And he offered a robust defence of the distinctions between research forms or outputs: what works for an article as opposed to a monograph. The difference is more than vehicular; there is (or should be) something incarnationally different

1. Heather Love, 'Close but not deep: Literary ethics and the descriptive turn', *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), 371–91.
2. Geoffrey Crossick, *Monographs and Open Access: A Report to HEFCE* (January 2015), p. 13.

between long- and short-form publications. In assessing the function of the monograph, 'it is therefore important to avoid the danger of seeing it as an awkward outlier in relation to a mainstream framework of research communication defined by the journals and refereed conference proceedings that dominate the sciences'.[2] Rather, the monograph's emphasis is on sustained argument, on voice (the identity of the writer), and it represents a contribution to research that is durable (long-term as well as long-form knowledge) and that shapes further thought. Crossick's words sound as much a caution to the academic profession as to the policy-makers, when he writes that 'books must be understood best as a vehicle for long-term knowledge communication, preservation and curation, rather than solely as an asset for short-term exploitation and with an associated short shelf-life'.[3] Policy-makers, funders, career pressures, publishers are already blurring the distinction between articles and books. Digital publishing and its associated consequences could well accelerate this. Smaller packets of information or argument – chapters or sections of chapters, amenable to access on student mobile devices? The distributed book downloadable perhaps as digital mini ebooks? That might be one model, and it would alter radically the nature of the academic book and of academic enquiry.

I'd like to make a plea for material books and what they best represent.

There is much to commend open access, especially if it means that the reach of serious scholarship is wider than that of the immediate and narrow academic sub-field, if it offers a way to situate serious scholarship at the centre of society's cultural life. But will it? How open will it be? Who will fund it? Who will preserve it? I'd like to make a plea for material books and what they best represent, features that a host of pressures from digital technology, policy-makers, and career assessment panels risk downgrading. It is really quite simple: technological changes tend to combine with intellectual changes. Katherine Hayles put it like this in her 2005 book *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts:* '"what we make" and "what (we think) we are" coevolve together'.[4] The time-stamped digital perspective is one route to making and understanding; the space-invasive print perspective is another. Print is fixed and good at shaping collective opinion. By contrast, a prime characteristic of electronic texts is to deny their common status as public objects; they are more easily customised, rendered individual, available for reuse as distinct from common/shared reading and debate. Digital technology makes many forms of research easier; things that become easier often too become more disposable. Targeted reading (maybe not even reading at all) becomes easier in the digital environment, offering the efficient release of scholarship from reading in the round, to Virginia Woolf the more humane discipline and a vital link between the academic world and the public sphere.

A term that emerged during Crossick's consultations was 'thinking through the book',[5] a powerful idea that suggests that the act of constructing and writing a book involves far more than the harvesting and communication of research findings. In *My Mother Was a Computer*, Hayles worked hard a particular word, 'intermediation', to denote the mediating interfaces that connect humans with the intelligent machines that are 'our collaborators' in making, storing, and disseminating information.[6] Another powerful word, thanks to business models like that of Amazon, is 'disintermediation', meaning to cut out the middleman. This might be the high-street bookseller or, within a progressive digital ecology, it might be the reflective academic herself. As retrieval gets smarter and as quantification sets almost every academic agenda, the invitation to replace books as voices and arguments to be engaged within a critical community with individualised technical searching will seem more and more seductive. It may also, in the not so long run, undermine our best efforts to ensure the survival of the humanities.

Is there anything more at stake here than how we present and access scholarly information? Are there any constant values that the humanities should seek to promote? Will those values have changed when the computational perspective becomes our only or even our major scholarly lens? Is there value in a long-term commitment to print? Might it be timely to reflect upon the value of the ends to which the digital is a useful means? These are the questions that should be setting our agendas within the humanities and informing our discussions around the academic book of the future. ▬

3. Crossick, p. 25.
4. N. Katherine Hayles, My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts (2005), p. 243.
5. Crossick, p. 15.
6. Hayles, p. 33.