

The academic book of the future



As the British Academy's contribution to Academic Book Week in November 2015, the *British Academy Review* conducted a short

series of interviews with a number of British Academy-supported early career scholars on different aspects of academic book publication.



Audio recordings of these interviews can be heard via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/academicbookweek2015

The issues are discussed further here by Professor **Mary Morgan FBA**, the British Academy's Vice-President (Publications). She is also a member of the Strategy Board for 'The Academic Book of the Future' project, which is funded by the AHRC in collaboration with the British Library.

What is the fate of the academic book: is it doomed to die or does it have a new lease of life? Early career scholars suggest that the life-form of the monograph remains vital to them – but the reasons are worth teasing out, and despite e-publishing the form such books could take remains to be fully explored.

In an illuminating series of interviews, scholars at the British Academy's Early Career Research Showcase event on 9 October 2015 told us why the book is not going to die just yet. They spoke about the continuing importance of the academic monograph on deeply personal grounds. The monograph is the place where they create the space of their own scholarship, and in placing their name on it like a flag, they mark out that territory as theirs. A monograph, particularly the first one, gives a scholar their identity in their field.

Monographs are beloved of such scholars (particularly in the humanities

and social sciences where monographs matter), not just as identity objects within their community, but because they are places where you can develop and achieve big things: produce accounts of depth as well as scope and detail. But their love of the monograph is not just intellectual; there is a sure attachment to the importance of the physical object. There remains strong commitment to print monographs on cognitive grounds, and on efficiency grounds: usage creates a degree of focus and engagement not achievable on screen reading. But there are equally aesthetic and tactile grounds: scholars love turning pages – back and forth, they love the sense of there being a whole book to read, they love the objects themselves.

Academics coming into the profession continue to want monographs and want printed monographs as a shared commitment to scholarship of great quality. The monograph is here to stay, with a healthy community of rising star producers and of publishers to publish them. That is why the academic book will not just go away.

But equally, new forms of publishing have prompted reflections on the things that are not monographs, and on alternative ways of getting serious ideas to travel well into and across the community. One of the obvious issues is length – monographs are a long form, but the very short forms of blogs and intermediate forms of journal articles leave many spaces. For example, will half-monographs become an established genre under a new label? Digital modes of publishing have also opened up a wider range of writing possibilities which are complementary in many respects, and early career scholars will be looking for mutual dependence rather than independence.

Yet these ideas sit within existing possibilities and it is in fact much more difficult to rethink the monographic book than it seems. For my first post-PhD research work on late 19th-century America economics, I wanted

to write a monograph with a circular form. I imagined a book that was like a rolling card index system – you could start at any chapter and read chapters in any order. There would be no introduction and no conclusion, for there was no overall argument separately from the substantive chapters, and the linear order of chapters was not just unimportant, but positively to be denied. It was a jigsaw-making project not a sequence-making project. Of course this could not work; it might work more easily in our digital world. But the reflection on digital possibilities from one Academy-supported scholar whose work is based on digital modelling of the city-scape of Ancient Rome¹ suggests that we have not really solved the relatively simple problem of order of presentation, let alone figured out new fully digital forms of reporting scholarship that are equivalent to the print-monograph in scope and depth, for his work is visually- and digitally-led, not writing- and print-led. His project exemplifies the challenge of the academic book of the future in the most immediate and rigorous form: the project has the right depth and scope to be a monograph, but how can this be a book?

This all suggests that the real benefits of digital technology are not yet realised in digital monographs. E-print and paper print can be seen as complementary rather than different forms, but the form remains the same. Experiments with monographs and with digital technology are both required to help us rethink what counts as a monograph without losing that important sense of identity-fixing the monograph carries with it, and while still enabling a scholar to grapple successfully with materials of scope and depth.

1. See Matthew Nicholls, 'Digital visualisation: Ancient Rome, and beyond' in this issue of the *British Academy Review*.

This article was originally written for the British Academy Blog, <http://blog.britac.ac.uk>