

The Opportunity Costs of Remaining a Book Discipline

Lara Putnam

For more than a decade, we have declared monograph publishing in crisis.¹ Do structural shifts make it all the more crucial to sustain our discipline's self-imposed rule that scholarship valued for promotion must arrive in 300-page chunks? Or might we take a deep breath, step back, and tally the costs of remaining a book discipline?

Tidal shifts underway in library budgeting and undergraduate attention spans make the economics of monograph publication ever more challenging. Specialized texts aimed at the dozen top experts in a subfield are the books *least* viable under these conditions. Yet junior professors must write books perfectly pitched for that audience—for the future outside reviewers of their tenure dossiers—and then persuade presses to publish. Straddling these two mandates with a single text is certainly possible: no one would be getting tenure if it weren't. But is it optimal? Always optimal? What might be gained if other paths were open?

Handcuffing scholarly dissemination to a single unit size—80,000- to 120,000-word texts published between two physical covers—imposes opportunity costs along at least three dimensions: first, reduced visibility and accessibility of research; second, reduced exposure to peer review; and third, reduced flexibility to reward public outreach. The first is a matter of collective knowledge,

the second of individual careers, the third of historians' place in public debate. None of these are realms where we can afford self-imposed handicaps today.

Visibility and Access

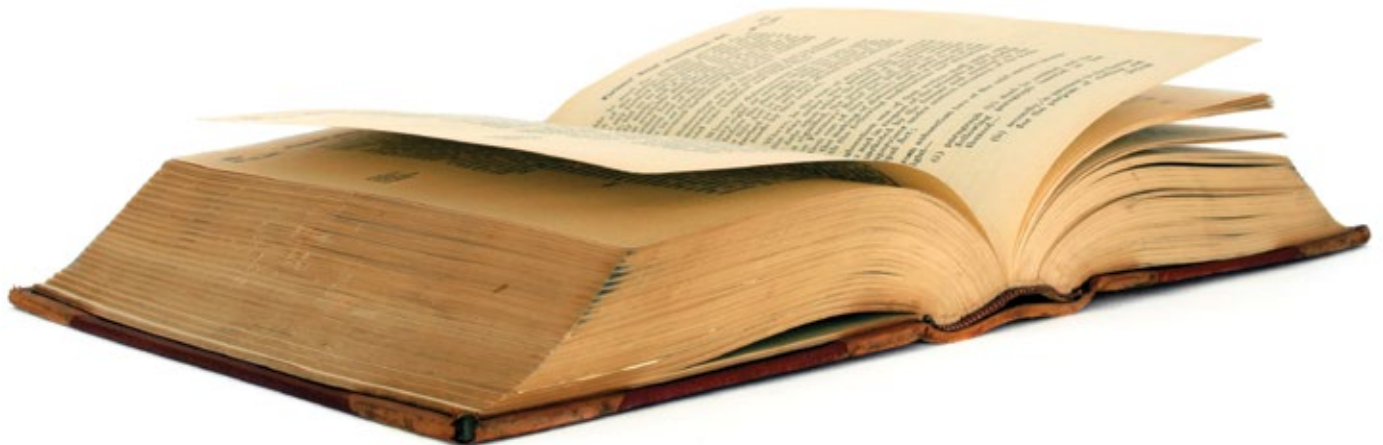
In a pre-Internet era, books were routinely more visible and more accessible than journal articles. Card catalogs and book indexes were key conduits to information. In contrast, journals had to be searched title by title at best, or examined issue by issue for those that didn't publish multiyear indices. Painstaking guides like the *Handbook of Latin American Studies* were worth their weight in gold but were limited in their ability to provide peripheral vision. In such a world, it genuinely made sense to put all your intellectual eggs into book-size scholarly baskets. They were branded and visible. If someone wanted to know what you had to say, she could find it all in one place. And if someone didn't know you from Adam but wanted to know about topic X, she could find out what you had to say about it, as long as the Library of Congress catalogers had pegged that piece of your contribution.

Within that information ecosystem, books were both more visible and more accessible than articles, and the fact that they were long—encompassing every useful

fact a given scholar had uncovered over the course of about a decade, and every smart thought she had had about those facts—was a feature, not a bug.

Fast-forward a quarter century. We no longer rely on the monograph as aggregator. Web-based search offers vastly more encompassing, accurate, and granular discovery. Obviously, digital searching can be done well or poorly, can miss key sources or mistake volume for value. But the bottom line is that the limitations that once made 10,000 words of historical scholarship much more visible if packaged alongside 90,000 words by the same author in a single book, rather than alongside other people's works in a periodical journal, have come undone. Paint those eggs and tuck them away in hollows across the land: folks who need them will be able to find every one.

Accessibility has also shifted. When information traveled in physical form, big chunks were more efficiently accessed than dispersed smaller chunks. No longer. To be sure, costs and restrictions surrounding digitized journal access are fraught. Key battles will be waged between publishers and libraries within which we, as producers and consumers, have critical roles to play. But even under current policies, almost every historical journal permits authors to post pre-copyedited versions of published articles on institutional



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repositories after at most a two-year embargo.² With structures already in place, then, we can make essentially everything we publish in article form freely accessible to anyone with an Internet connection anywhere in the world with just a two-year lag. Anything we publish in book form becomes available for similar access . . . 70 years after our deaths.

None of this says people who want to publish book-size projects in book form shouldn't do so. It's simply to note that whereas once both visibility and accessibility were greater for research published in books rather than articles, the two advantages are now reversed.

Peer Review

Part of my eagerness to imagine history as an article discipline reflects the five years I spent as co-senior editor of the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, witnessing the peer review system from within. Sure, some readers delayed; some sour notes were hit. But overall it was truly inspiring to see the detailed and thoughtful advice you all are willing to provide each other with no reward in return—and just how much our work improves through that process.

Given that book publishers, facing the tidal shifts mentioned above, want no more than one or two chapters that overlap prior journal publication, remaining a book discipline artificially raises the cost of publishing articles. This means scholars see fewer total peer reviews, and go for long stretches without any peer review feedback at all.

Here the threshold effect we've created is particularly perverse. For purposes of promotion, you get no credit for having written 6/7 of a publishable book. So risk-averse mentors preach "Finish the book" before all else, and risk-averse juniors feverishly comply.

I don't think we appreciate how costly this is. Peer reviewers write extensive, insightful, and frank assessments, routinely and for free. Junior scholars would benefit enormously from multiple previews of the kinds of critique established specialists have to offer, *over the course of an early career*, rather than just two readers' reports on a book manuscript when it's too late to fix anything substantive, and when the stakes are painfully high.

The removal of scholars from the peer review process for long stretches post-tenure

is also costly. Associate professors' reluctance to publish articles is a rational response to the threshold effects the "book discipline" model imposes. But to spend years away from the call-and-response of peer review can feed intellectual isolation and make reentry unnecessarily fraught. That's not the sole cause of mid-career stalls—but surely it doesn't help.

And in addition to the costs to individuals, there are costs to collective knowledge as well. If a scholar publishes six of seven articles on the road to promotion and for some reason gets no further, we all share the benefit of six articles' worth of knowledge. If a scholar writes six of seven book chapters and halts, that knowledge stays in the fortress of her computer forever.

Flexibility

Structuring professional expectations in a book discipline is like living in a land of \$100 bills. Maybe you'd like to be more flexible about what to buy. But the bottom line is you can't make change. We recognize the need to reward not just research and scholarly dissemination but teaching, service, and outreach. Yet if the irreducible unit of promotable scholarship is a seven-year research project leading to a 100,000-word monograph, it doesn't leave much room for flexibility.

In contrast, a world in which six or seven good articles in refereed journals form a routine basis for tenure and promotion is one with far greater potential for variation. Maybe some departments would target a 70-30 split between scholarly and public outreach, expecting four or five articles and a sustained public presence as blogger or essayist. Maybe scholars within a single department could negotiate personalized targets to maximize their particular gifts.

We would not likely stop writing books. Historians tend to love books with a profound and geeky passion. But what a range of books we might write! You might publish four scholarly articles, say, and one book geared to sharing those insights with the general public in words written just for them.

The bottom line is that insisting historians' scholarly output arrive in book-size chunks in order to count for promotion radically reduces the flexibility of early and mid-career scholars to invest in anything else, be

it peer-reviewed articles or public outreach or digital genres as yet uncreated.

Note that reputation-building among full professors is already free of the monographic imperative. And, doubtless in part in response, senior historians write all kinds of wonderful things, playing with format and focus in ways they earlier might not have risked—or had time to risk, since there was a very specific different task required for advancement. But why structure the system so that no rational assistant or associate professor can do the same? Why should we so constrain the creativity of younger scholars when, truly, we don't have to?

Deans already understand what peer-reviewed journals are. They understand "article fields." Pushing in this direction does not require a radical reeducation of external gatekeepers. It also doesn't require devaluing the traditional monograph as a route to promotion. Let a thousand flowers bloom. Break the monopoly of the \$100 bill. Becoming a book-and/or-article discipline does not erase the challenges facing us: but it does open up a wider range of solutions.

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Notes

1. E.g., James M. McPherson, "A Crisis in Scholarly Publishing," *Perspectives on History*, October 2003, <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2003/a-crisis-in-scholarly-publishing>; Robert B. Townsend, "History and the Future of Scholarly Publishing," *Perspectives on History*, October 2003, <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2003/history-and-the-future-of-scholarly-publishing>; William Cronon, "How Long Will People Read History Books?" *Perspectives on History*, October 2012, <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2012/how-long-will-people-read-history-books>.

2. Such embargoes, while not negligible, hurt less in history than in disciplines where revision is more rapid. Two years is a small fraction of a solid article's useful life.