Summary of Digital Monographs in the Humanities and Social Sciences: Report on User Needs

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In the European Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) there is fertile ground for the development of eMonographs published in Open Access. As this study shows, an increasing number of scholars in these disciplines are using digital resources and tools in their daily research practice, in their reading and writing, as well as in their teaching curricula. A substantial part of the scholars in these fields is open to innovations in publishing formats and regimes, most importantly concerning eMonographs and Open Access. Despite the fact that this openness is not equally common in all scholarly fields, there is a critical mass to buttress the Open Access publishing of eMonographs. Many scholars in the HSS see this newly developing form of publishing as an important contribution to their ambition to share their knowledge and research results with their peers and other potential readers, provided there is sufficient quality control.

These are the main conclusions of this study based on the direct consultation of some 40 experts from relevant groups of stakeholders in academic publishing, a review of relevant literature, data gathered from two round table discussions and an online survey that reached approximately 250 scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Economic imperative
In addition to the openness to innovation of a substantial number of scholars, an economic imperative impels a way out of the so-called monograph crisis. This crisis threatens the continued existence of the monograph in its present form. Printed monographs in the HSS constitute a dwindling market because of the current acquisition policies of academic libraries who are facing increased budget cuts. At the same time, libraries have closed ‘big deals’ with large publishers, selling licenses to mostly Science, Technology and Medicine (STM) eJournals in large packages. These deals consume increasing parts of the libraries’ budgets, leaving fewer possibilities to acquire HSS monographs. For these and other reasons, academic libraries strongly support the development of eMonographs in Open Access. This is, first of all, because they expect eMonographs to contribute to a more efficient operation. Second, because eMonographs fit into their perceived, future role of information and service providers in a digital scholarly communication infrastructure. For instance, eMonographs enable remote and simultaneous use, which is a clear advantage for both the library and the scholar, and contributes to accessibility and efficiency. Research funders and universities largely share this position.
The position of publishers on this matter is less univocal. Academic presses tend to favour both the development of eMonographs and Open Access, under the condition that a business model will arise that makes this practice feasible and economically viable. Commercial publishers are hesitant, pointing to the existence of a still substantial print market and a few outright refusals by some users in particular disciplines to switch to the digital. Other publishers have brought the present structure of the publishing industry into the discussion as well. They suggest a new role for publishers, as academic content providers and developers of services for the scholarly community in the different fields and disciplines, using the broad array of possibilities digital technology has to offer. None of them expects that the role of the publisher will disappear in a digital future, a position shared by the majority of other actors in the field of scholarly communication. Organizing independent peer review and performing crucial editing functions remains necessary in the future.

**Contested Fields and Disciplines**

It appears that scholarly communication and academic publishing are – more than ever – contested fields, where new developments and possibilities, produced by changes in information and communication technology, form the basis of discussions and even disputes about the culture, politics and economics of scholarship, science, and academic publishing.

The main obstacles for the development of Open Access eMonographs in the HSS are cultural and institutional. A certain number of scholars in different disciplines and fields still express great hesitation with regard to eMonographs as the equivalents of paper-based publications in terms of quality and prestige. Since the web is the context in which eMonographs will be accessed, many scholars presume that quality cannot be guaranteed, given the wide range and quality of information available online. A similar argument is made about publishing in Open Access, implying that it does not apply the same quality standards as traditional print publishing. However, many scholars consider this as a temporary and perhaps even a generational problem, which may disappear as time passes and as new practices develop. That does not prevent it, however, from being an obstacle for digital development in the present age.

As a result of this, there is a kind of institutionalized skepticism within HSS towards eMonographs published in Open Access. They are considered less important and prestigious on a scholar’s record and only contributing minimally to their reputations compared to print publications. They therefore add less value to academic career perspectives and have a limited value in the acquisition of research funding. Digital, Open Access publications are not yet as recognized as print publications in a traditional regime of paid-for printed books. However, this is, as we have mentioned, seen as a temporary issue that may change when eMonographs published in Open Access becomes a more common practice and proves that it can produce high quality scholarly content and have a significant influence in various disciplines. However, for the time being, it puts constraints on the development of this new publishing platform.

**Scholars, Fields and Formats**

The book as a media format still fits into the HSS culture. A monograph, be it print or electronic, provides the necessary space to unfold an extensive and sustained argument. However, this homology between field and format is not pertinent in all
disciplines. Research findings indicate that for fields as different as media studies and linguistics the journal article is a suitable publication format and its use is on the rise.

eMonographs and Open Access publishing are only illustrations of the turbulent context that present-day scholars find themselves in. There has been a proliferation of both print and digital channels and platforms distributing and providing access to scholarly information. There is increasing pressure on scholars today to publish, to sustain their careers, and to improve their chances of acquiring additional funding. The urge to publish is obvious, whereas the time available for reading decreases, in a situation of the ever-expanding availability of information. This produces a need for selection and the filtering of relevant information for scholars. Scholars have indicated that a good search function is a prime requirement for them in terms of an extra-service provided as part of an online library of monographs. They would also like to have the option to download eBooks from a library and they also appreciate services that connect texts, like ‘forward linking’, which enables them to assess a publication’s use after it has been published.

As different modes of information sharing, print and electronic publications perform different roles for scholars. They use print mainly for in-depth study, whereas electronic is more often used for consultation purposes, where they dip in and out of the content. It is not clear if this situation will persist, implying a possible development towards a hybrid situation (use of both print and electronic), or that screen reading will become common practice as the usability of electronic reading devices improves.

Although scholars remain the main source of and target for scholarly information exchange, with the proliferation of Open Access publications, a broader audience will also be able to take advantage of them. A group of forerunners among HSS scholars are already using digital applications extensively. They expect many changes in scholarship and research practice once the various applications and services are available and widely used, ranging from digital data mining to enhanced publications and science blogging. Science blogging allows scholars to share their findings and thoughts directly with the audience, providing a sense of immediacy and topicality unimaginable in the formal context of scholarly publishing. This and other uses of informal, direct and web 2.0-based forms of informal scholarly communication is on the rise within HSS, although it is not evenly distributed amongst all fields and is, in some cases, strongly contested. At the same time, there are many scholars that kept their distance from all things digital. Moreover, the survey part of this project indicates that 30% of (HSS) scholars have hardly any understanding of what Open Access is. Nevertheless, both those with and without specific knowledge concerning Open Access publishing prior to the survey, have indicated that they value the positive effects of Open Access and eMonographs on accessibility and the dissemination of their work. In terms of their intellectual property, their main concern is the integrity of the texts they produce; in general, they are not very inclined to restrict access to their work.

Digitization, Open Access and Structural Changes
Digitization of monographs and the advent of Open Access mark a new phase in the changing structure of academic publishing, where not only the role and position of scholars, but also those of publishers, academic libraries, universities and other funding agents are subject to change.
Publishers have made a significant contribution to innovation in scholarly communication through the development of eJournals, accessible for scholars through licenses acquired by academic libraries. Academic publishers realized an attractive business opportunity by offering journal content in a digital format to libraries. The development of the eMonograph, however, was inspired by a different motive: a crisis in print media.

The move to digital, both in journals and monographs, changed the role and ambitions of academic libraries. Libraries do not want to be seen as mere conduits for publishers’ digital products and services. They are increasingly evolving into information service providers for faculty and students, developing services for their customers within their institutions in a combination of on-site and online services. Moreover, they aspire to supporting their university staffs in their ambitions to publish digitally and they want to provide optimal access to their works, as they in turn attempt to raise their positions in citation indexes. Making publications available electronically in Open Access through their institutional repositories is one way of achieving this goal.

Open Access has an additional effect on the roles of different actors in the publishing world. Both libraries and funding agents (universities, science foundations and scholarly bodies) have urged for Open Access publishing in their efforts to re-capture part of the profits from eJournal publishing that currently end up in the pockets of publishing firms. This argument is of limited value in the case of HSS monographs because they are, across the board, not even remotely as profitable as journals are. In many cases, HSS monograph publishing has become a loss-leading activity in the age of print. In this context, publishers as well as libraries and funding agents are open to experimenting with new business models. In many of these models, in which Open Access is a constitutive element, funding agents have become increasingly important. When authors or research funding institutions pay the costs of publishing upfront (in an author-pays model), funders acquire a more prominent role. When that institution is the university, academic libraries figure prominently in the new set up, as present empirical examples show. This new configuration may have structural implications for the role of publishers, evolving from developers and marketers of scholarly content among academic libraries, to providers of services to the scholarly community, ranging from the organization of peer reviews, and editorial and technical support, to added value services enabling advanced search functions and enhanced publications, among other things.

Values and Mission
The system of scholarly communication serves a set of core values. As the findings in this study indicate, quality and accessibility are the main values cherished by this community. The system’s mission, as appears from this research, is to provide broad and perpetual access to the best scholarship in an efficient, effective, and trusted way. Dissemination and the sharing of knowledge among scholars and the broader society, as well as certifying the quality of scholarly work and those responsible for it, are key requirements for this system. It should serve scholarly and scientific development as well as social, cultural, and economic progress. Therefore, it is necessary to bridge the gap between scholarly practice and society. Open Access publishing of eMonographs contributes to this goal. Scholarly progress requires a rigorous system of quality selection. It identifies the best scholars and scholarship and serves as a filter and selection mechanism, not only for scholarly information, but also for candidates,
institutions, and research themes funding agents want to support financially. For that reason, the members of the European HSS community have defined a rigorous system of quality selection, based on peer review, as a crucial element for the success of Open Access publishing of eMonographs.

**Experimenting for the Future**
Although present developments in scholarly communication in HSS point to the increased importance of ePublishing and the advent of Open Access, only the contours of a new publishing practice for monographs have thus far been outlined. Those concerned with communication in HSS have voiced uncertainty about the future models underlying a potential new practice of monograph publishing in their fields. Experimenting with new models and practices, on a flexible learn-as-you-go basis is essential for saving and transforming the monograph from a (print) publishing model that is no longer sustainable.