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# It's time to put the point back into the pen of scholarly writing

6 May 2010

**Obscenely priced books and journals, glacial timescales and limited formats are squeezing the life out of academic publishing, argues Keith Kahn-Harris**



A few weeks ago I had a review of an edited book of middling quality published in a reasonably widely read academic journal. I actually submitted the review in 2008. The book itself was published in 2006, based on a conference that took place in 2003. The book is priced at £90 and frankly the reason I wrote the review was because that was the only way of getting hold of a copy for free.

I usually get a warm feeling of satisfaction when I have something published, but not this time. Not that I was dissatisfied with the review, it's

just that the whole exercise felt pointless: a ludicrously belated review of a book that is too expensive for most people to buy and is now out of date anyway. On top of all that, I have no idea whether the review will be read by people who are interested in the topic and whether it will influence them.

The appearance of the review crystallised a deep disquiet regarding academic publishing that has been building in me for quite a while. It's not that I have a problem with specialist publishing for an academic audience (I've done plenty of it myself). I've learned a huge amount from and been inspired by articles in the most obscure of journals and from arguments presented in the weightiest of tomes. The problem is the near-complete disconnection of academic publishing from the rest of literary culture and the monomaniacal focus of the academy on only a limited range of publication formats. (I should note at this point that my argument applies to the humanities and social sciences.)

There is nothing wrong with articles and books that are of limited interest, but academic publications are often self-limiting due to their formats: crazily priced books that will be bought only by libraries; obscenely priced journals that are difficult to access; and protracted publishing timescales that limit contemporary relevance. Whether or not these limitations are economically inevitable (and I cannot for the life of me see why a publisher should deliberately produce books in formats that ensure exclusivity), the result is that academic publications are further ensconced in the ivory tower, regardless of their possible wider interest.

My frustration with academic publications has been exacerbated by my growing love for serious non-academic literary culture. I am frequently inspired and challenged by non-academic publications that are accessible but serious-minded and that deal with complex issues in intellectually incisive but non-jargonistic ways.

Furthermore, non-academic literary culture is a space in which writing style is valued, where carefully crafted prose is not an optional extra (as in most academic journal articles) but essential to the work itself.

In the wide borderlands between aloof academic publishing and the more degraded and dumbed-down forms of journalism lie a whole host of serious writing formats that are neglected by the academy: Montaigne-style essays, literary non-fiction, polemics, blogs, small magazines, popular history and so on.

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The requirements of the research assessment exercise and its planned successor, the research excellence framework, discourage academics from exploring these formats, or at the very least ensure that they receive no career-boosting kudos for doing so. While it is true that some academics do manage to write books that cross over into the wider world (particularly historians or voguish critical theorists), these are very much the exception and it tends to be very senior academics - who have less to lose - who are most likely to spread their wings in this way.

Academics in the humanities and social sciences need to question whether the current narrowly conceived conventions of academic publication are in our best interests. If reality is multifaceted, then writing that responds to it needs to be multifaceted, too. Academics should be encouraged to explore a heterogeneous range of formats, reaching different audiences and finding new ways to write about research.

Of course, one of these formats should be the classic academic journal article, but journal publishing could be reconceived as a way of exploring complex technical and theoretical questions, rather than the default format of first resort. Indeed, some journals could be reconfigured to welcome a broader range of writing formats.

Above all, academics need to start seeing themselves as writers. Although there is certainly value to the ascetic, well-crafted specialist journal article, it is by no means the only writing aesthetic to have scholarly value.

As for the ridiculously delayed review of a tardily produced and stupidly expensive book - surely this should have no place any more?

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#### Source :

Keith Kahn-Harris is honorary research fellow at the Centre for Religion and Contemporary Society, Birkbeck, University of London.

#### Readers' comments

##### Michael Bulley 6 May, 2010

"Furthermore, non-academic literary culture is a space in which writing style is valued, where carefully crafted prose is not an optional extra (as in most academic journal articles) but essential to the work itself." (para 6). Modesty should forbid, I know, but I can't resist referring to an article of mine in THE in June 2006, in which I recount how I once asked one of the major British university presses why they published so many books that were so badly written: their reply was that they were not in the business of producing well-written books, but of disseminating research. I'd go further than the author here and say that incompetent writing usually indicates incompetent thinking.

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##### Lecturer 7 May, 2010

I agree with much of this piece. I went to a talk on 'how to get your article published' given by a former editor of one of the major sociological journals. She advised all the budding PhD students etc to boycott any journal that has a turnaround time of over three months [i.e. from submission to receiving reviews]. In my field [history], three months is a dream. Many of the 'top-rated' journals have a turnaround time of six months. I've known several colleagues who've submitted an article to the so-called top journal, but then hadn't received anything back for 18 months.

The humanities needs to rethink the purpose of academic journals. Are journals there to promote useful intellectual debate, or to stifle it?

I think the journals made a big mistake once they made the transition to online - they just replicated the paper copies, without embracing the possibilities of interactivity and quicker turnaround times. What the major journals should have done when they first went online was to develop a new style of journal, where users could comment on articles, there would be hyperlinks, discussion pages, links to digitised archives etc - and then if an online debate was started on a particular article, then perhaps the debate could be summarised in the next issue, or the author be invited to submit a response piece.

The journals missed that opportunity, and now it can't happen. People are creatures of habit, and so will just use online journals in the same way as the paper copies, with the resultant slow pace of uptake and no opportunity for debate.

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