

Ebooks herald the second coming of books in university social science

by Blog Admin

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Books at last are going digital – bringing to an end the futile period of paper books losing out to digital journals. With prices falling and instant availability leading to the growth of people reading ebooks, [Patrick Dunleavy](#) foresees a renaissance of books as a major format in social science teaching, research, and impacts work. This push-back is strongly supported by the increasing emphasis on the impacts agenda; by increased attention to citations and real audience sizes; and by improved professionalism in the communication of the social sciences.



This year we reached a turning point in the unavailing struggle of conservative publishers (and authors) to [stick with paper books in a digital age](#). At last academic books across the social sciences have begun to go digital in enough numbers, and in the right useable formats, to be competitive again in social science teaching. There are two foundations for forecasting a renaissance of books' influence across the social sciences – first, the digital publishing shift itself; and second, a range of other supportive changes in academic practices.

The digital shift in academic publishing

Summing up the lessons of digital change for higher education, [Larry Summers](#) recently remarked: 'Things take longer to happen than you think they will, and then happen faster than you thought they could'. The digital shift is already unravelling and re-knitting the practice of modern scholarship in myriad ways, some charted by Martin Weller in [his key book](#). But even he missed some elements – such as [the rise of multi-author blogs](#) – and how quickly many 'reputation' problems in parts of the digital sphere may prove manageable as major universities get involved, a critical mass of expert reader/debaters is created, and new developments (like [altmetrics](#)) occur.

In the complex digital shift for books, four main developments are already in train or imminent. First, publishers like Oxford University Press are releasing some student-accessible intermediate texts and more overt textbooks in great formats. A university library subscribes to the ebook, and then students can freely access and download all the chapters in PDF form, save them and use them in just the same way as journal articles. Suddenly you can list these books on Moodle and your whole class or seminar group has instant access to all of the book – wiping out at a stroke the crippling disadvantages of paper books discussed in [Part 1 of this blog](#).

Second, other enterprising publishers are beginning to realize that the marketing effort involved in trying to solely sell books as individual entities is just too hideously expensive to ever be viable in the digital age for products as low-selling as academic monographs. But suppose instead that a publisher builds up a large library of high quality books, with good pre-screening and peer review of book manuscripts or proposals at the outset. Why should book publishers be any differently situated from journal publishers here? Libraries buy all journals sight unseen – they know what articles were published in the past, but not what will be published this year. So the purchase is made on the reputation of the journal, not on its precise contents. In the same way, if an academic publisher has a good reputation, why shouldn't they essentially market a whole library of books to universities in advance?

The LSE Library has recently signed up to [Palgrave Connect](#) that gives its students and academics complete ebook access to the ongoing Palgrave Macmillan library of monograph books across the social sciences. You scan the collection and can download whole books. As this far-sighted model unrolls into the future, Palgrave Connect will grow from the 7,500 books (across social science, business and humanities) it covers at present. The firm is likely to dramatically increase usage of their research books, and not just

by researchers and PhD students, but from interested general readers too.

Third, the rise of ebooks, is going to revolutionize academics' and students' book-buying behaviours across the social sciences in the next two years. Ebooks can be downloaded and read instantly (via Kindles, Nooks and iPads), which cuts out almost all of the previously high 'transactions costs' of finding and accessing books, that were much higher for academic books than for best sellers. 'Instant' buying of ebooks on a whim can also be accommodated costlessly on your PC or iPad, without loading up your backpack or bulging your bedsit's shelves (for students), or adding to the hundred of books already overloading your shelves (for academics). So with these barriers gone, the key remaining one is price.

In my view social science students, teachers and researchers have a huge unfulfilled demand for books, that has been particularly suppressed year after year by crippling high book prices in the UK, Europe and (most of all) Australia. With paper production and book retailers taken out of the price of books, there is simply no justification for the current prices of academic ebooks. The laws of supply and demand predict with infallible logic that lower prices will lead to some increased sales, but how much? Publishers always represent the 'price elasticity of demand' as steeply curved, so that lower prices produce only slightly more sales. But we know with ebooks that users are already reading many more books than people who stick with paper books (25 books a year for US e-readers according to [Pew Internet](#), compared with just 15 for paper book readers).

Book prices are best thought about in terms of a rate of exchange with Starbucks medium lattes, currently costing £2.50 in the UK. So an academic book at £50 is 20 lattes – a 'joke' price that clearly only an institution will pay. An academic book at £25 is ten lattes – a big decision that you will probably put off buying online or in the bookshop. But suppose an academic or serious ebook instead cost:

- four lattes (£10) a copy: student demand might still be lowish but academic purchases will double;
- three lattes (£7.50): student demand will pick up and academics will be making 'whim' purchases; and
- two lattes (£5): almost all university readers will think it worthwhile to buy a copy, for even a single week's topic.

Of course, these prices are demanding one for publishers to reach, but many excellent, well-written and serious 'pop science' books are in this zone already. 'Popular social science' books have also demonstrated some huge sales gains from lower prices and better writing, both effects that I think could follow more generally if ebook prices can be pushed down and standards of academic communication can be improved. And in other ways the definition of what is a book is loosening, such as Palgrave's short-books ideas.

Fourth, new kinds of digital-only publishers will soon appear. Brand new [academic presses](#) could be set up to produce both research and 'intermediate text' books in solely electronic forms for the university market worldwide. Universities currently without an academic press – such as the LSE – will need to re-examine their stance as the viability of the new e-only, collections-based, well peer-reviewed model of publishing becomes ever clearer. Established university presses will come under pressure to match the low costs, low prices and innovations of the new models. There will be for-profit entrants to the academic ebook/collections-marketed model too, some of whom (perhaps Amazon or Google themselves?) have the scale and market knowledge to deliver really big on modest capital investments.

Academics too will find new ways through to effective self-publishing, just as they have with multi-author blogs and online, free-to-view journals. A strong stimulus for all these changes is that established publishers of books and journals, along with Amazon's reliance on its impoverishing AZT ebook format, continue to be un-innovative about basics – like handling social media, including full colour text and charts in everything, and comprehensive URL and electronic referencing. If modern blogs can do all this, why can't publishers? Unless all the established firms suddenly have a change of heart, and also emulate the Palgrave distribution model above (both rather unlikely), the scope for new entrants is considerable.

Four other reasons for books to bounce back

The renaissance of books is not just digitally influenced, and four other key factors are increasingly important too:

1. Like blogs, *books foster cross-disciplinary learning*. Books are generally better-written and less hard-boiled than journal articles, making them far more accessible for non-specialist readers. Increasingly too, the happening developments in social science will be cross-disciplinary and take place at speed, via books (the long-form), multi-author blogs with cross-disciplinary audiences (the short form), and Twitter (the news stream). Taken together this modern combination reaches across disciplinary boundaries far faster and more effectively than any previous mode of academic communication. There is no role here for siloed journals locked into paywalls, professional jargon and referee-induced conservatism. This is partly why there is no age effect in digital uptake. Senior academics quite widely use the new routes, but younger academics seeking tenure must still churn their way through the journals process for certification reasons.

2. *Books maximize external impacts*. No one outside academia (and a few elite institutions) reads journals, because they just can't get past the paywall. Businesses and governments are very reluctant to pay journal entry prices, even in fields that might seem directly relevant for them – partly because they deal with joined-up problems that fit very poorly into the finely siloed and fanatically protected journal terrains. Even if they did have access to the text, external readers do not wish to plough through the obscure and ossified forms of communication that academic journals too often embody.

Yet the impacts agenda is gathering force. In the US the National Science Foundation has been forced by Congress to stop funding so much esoterically specialized research in favour of projects with traceable 'real world' impacts. And in the UK the REF 2014 exercise now allocates a fifth of all research funding to external impacts as demonstrated by an 'impacts template' and 'impact case studies'. A top-rated impact case study could attract funding of between £500,000 and £650,000 over five years for successful departments.

Good, well-written but serious books get past most academic obstacles, and can achieve a resonance that articles never can. Think of Thaler and Sunstein's obscure concept of 'libertarian paternalism', which knocked around the fringes of policy debates with minimal impact until alchemically transformed into the one-word summation [Nudge](#) and made available in book form, from which it conquered the policy world in many countries. Similarly Atul Gawande's important and accessible [The Checklist Manifesto](#) is surely destined to make more professional people think about their practice in many fields than hundreds of uber-academic volumes on risk management and professional development. Of course, these are extreme cases and both are 'pop social science' books in form. Yet far more widely than this, academic books in digital form have the capacity to maximize external impacts. Where impacts count, books are back.

3. *Good books attract serious citations*. From where we are now, close to the nadir of books' influence in the social sciences (as described in Part 1 of this blog), there is no general empirical pattern across the social sciences whereby either books or articles performs better in attracting citations. The more book-using the discipline, the more books perform well. But books are not universally or generally better referenced.

Yet across many social sciences and business subjects, academics repeatedly find that in the 'power law' distributions of their Google Scholar citations, their books fare well, clustering in the upper reaches of the distribution and adding to their h scores more effectively than journal articles. We live in a metrics-driven world, and there is increasing scepticism about the value of journal articles (or chapters in books) that are not cited by anyone else in academic life. As this movement grows, academics will value more the proven effect shown by citations, and become less concerned to just build an unread inventory down the pages of their CV. So we can expect digitally accessible books to push back to a far greater role in driving citations.

4. *Books have more of a 'long tail' effect*. While journal article typically have a narrow window in which to secure citations (two to five years after publication), good books endure better and attract readers over a longer lifetime. The new digital collections formats will strengthen this feature.

Looking forward

The resistance of publishers to books going digital has not yet ended. It lives on still in various restrictive ebook formats that prevented the saving or even printing of text, and have already proved unuseable. Publishers also have many anti-customer biases, all designed to prop up profit levels. These include keeping ebook prices high in anti-competitive ways (as in the alleged Apple conspiracy with publishers in the US); keeping e-forms of classic textbooks priced high while renting them to student readers (the current focus of much Barnes and Noble effort); or restricting customers' use or re-use of their ebooks (as in Amazon's bizarre insistence that all ebooks downloaded from them are not owned by readers, and various other already-doomed efforts at ['digital rights management'](#)).

Yet the strong cultural barriers of the past have at least begun to wind down in publishing and in universities. So academic books are escaping from the ghetto to which they were confined by paper-only formats [for almost two decades](#), and will shortly begin to rebuild their significance in a wider range of disciplines. The challenge now for academia is to match the improving technological aspects with better researched and more professionally communicated work.

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