

# Open access monographs: a humanities research perspective

This article discusses the thoughts of a humanities researcher in relation to open access (OA) publishing. Digital media have dramatically improved access to historic texts but library e-books are frustrating due to software and loan arrangements. Authors of illustrated books risk losing control of book design, although new media offer opportunities to improve image quality and access. Alfred Tennyson's career shows that authors have been sensitive about the physical form of their work since the Victorian period and ignoring the material significance of the book could make us overlook the fundamental changes that the e-book represents. Monographs retain value as a way of evaluating substantive research projects and those published through the OA process will have great advantages over the commercial e-book. 'Green' OA publishing is impractical for humanities scholars and funded 'gold' OA publishing is likely to involve a labour-intensive application process.

## Introduction

Books are important to me for three related reasons. Firstly, as an academic, the writing and reading of monographs is an important part of my professional life. Secondly, as a historian who works predominantly with visual and material culture, publishing raises questions about the relationship between words and images, an area that open access (OA) publishing is likely to influence. Thirdly, I have an academic interest in the history of publishing. I am currently writing a monograph about Alfred Tennyson's difficult relationship with the Victorian publishing industry; Queen Victoria's Poet Laureate struggled with the new formats of the 1860s in a way that has interesting resonances with our current situation.

I conform with most of the opinions expressed in the earlier *Insights* snapshot of academic attitudes towards the e-book<sup>1</sup>, and the monograph that I am writing for Palgrave Macmillan will be published as a traditional book and an e-book. This article will reflect on my current attitude towards e-books and then speculate on how this experience might be influenced by the OA business model.

## Reading and writing books and e-books

The research process has changed dramatically within my professional experience. In the past, my writing habits involved surrounding myself with books, photocopies and images, so that I could access materials without losing my train of thought. Now, instead of having eight or ten physical sources around me, I have a similar number of 'windows' open on my computer displaying notes, documents, photographs and a range of electronic resources such as Google Books, journal articles, museum websites and reference databases. I now need a large screen instead of a large desk – an issue I find is now referred to as 'screen real estate'! The need for bigger screens conflicts with the increasingly mobile nature of the modern university campus, where more and more tutorials and seminars are conducted in semi-public spaces, rather than in a 'private' office.

Access to historic primary sources has changed in very positive ways. As a doctoral student in the late 1990s, I had to travel from Exeter University to the British Library to read Victorian books and periodicals that I can now text-search on digital platforms. This is



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18 incredibly liberating, especially for scholars based in the provinces, as geographical distance from major research libraries has become less of a disadvantage. But from my perspective, the same sort of progressive access to secondary sources has been slower. For some years, bibliographical work has been much faster due to indexing operations such as JSTOR<sup>2</sup>, and PDF versions of journal articles are now the norm, but I am far less comfortable with the e-book. When I use e-books from my university library, I find the 'read online' software very clumsy and only use this option as a last resort. Downloading the e-book is more convenient and allows the use of better software (in my case, Adobe Reader) but the maximum loan period is three days, which implies a very different use of the book than the traditional four-week loan. Renewing the loan every few days is possible in theory but the whole set-up prevents me from using the e-book in a comparable way to a physical book.

When making detailed notes, the e-book is fine; in this context I would work at my desk, typing notes into a word processor while reading the source. But I often make notes in a more relaxed setting, perhaps at home outside working hours, scribbling on a piece of A4 paper folded inside a physical book. This is clearly not something that would work well with an e-book – having an electronic device open would ruin the informality of the more relaxed context. This might be because I use a laptop rather than a tablet or a Kindle but the affinity between the book and the piece of folded paper (which the book also 'stores') would still be absent.

I tend to prefer software that can capture whatever is on the screen. I use Evernote as it can capture web pages from my laptop or photographs from my mobile phone and index them in 'notebooks' that relate to specific research projects. I use this method to gather excerpts from digitized Victorian newspapers, historic books from Google Books and pages from recent secondary sources. This type of notation is particularly useful when I need to quote the passage in question, as I can check the source easily at proofing stage.

## E-books and artwork

In 2009 I edited an exhibition catalogue and collection of essays: *Tennyson Transformed*, published by Lund Humphries.<sup>3</sup> During production, I benefited from the expertise of editors, copy editors and designers who worked with me on the book. The designed element of the catalogue was an integral part of the way that it communicated: graphic design, layout and typography were crucial elements and the images presented a visual argument that echoed the textual arguments in the essays. In some instances the fact that two photographs faced each other on opposite pages was important for the point that the book sought to make. How are these issues going to be controlled in the context of an e-book? In one sense the e-book presents huge opportunities: illustrated books are plagued by copyright fees and this issue could be resolved by linking the text to images on museum or gallery websites. But although the image might be accessible, if the e-book was published in an HTML format, the author would be in danger of losing control of the relationship between text and image. The carefully structured environment that traditional book design offers is very different to a reader clicking between and resizing windows. Authorial control does not have to be compromised by the e-book but a dialogue needs to be opened up in order to enable authors to work within new publishing contexts. Authors who use visual material need to understand the potential value of the transition to e-books and will need help to explore the possibilities with design practitioners.

"In one sense the e-book presents huge opportunities ..."

At this point, I see resonances between our current situation and Tennyson's fraught relationship with his publisher, Moxon and Co, who started to publish 'gift books' of his poetry in the later 1850s.<sup>4</sup> These books had illustrations, decorative covers and were understood as being aimed at a feminine and middle-brow audience, not the kind of serious readers that Tennyson associated with his poetry. An illustrated edition of *The Princess* proved offensive (Figure 1 shows the glitzy cover of the 1865 edition) and a dispute over an extravagant illustrated edition of *Idylls of the King* eventually led to the failure of the Moxon firm.<sup>5</sup> Tennyson's dismay effectively stopped ambitious illustrated editions of his own poetry but he was powerless to influence the wider factors that drove the transformation of

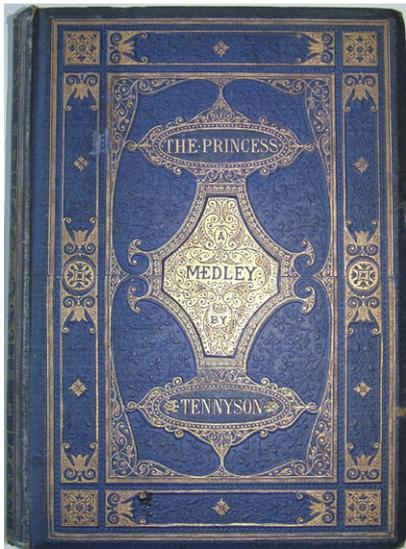


Figure 1. 1865 'gift book' edition of Tennyson's *The Princess*

the Victorian publishing industry. Gift books did not destroy poetry but they did modify its audience, a change aided by the new physical form that mediated between the words and how readers experienced them.

## The importance of the material

Tennyson's dislike of the commercial gift book reinforces one of the assumptions I work with as a historian of material culture, namely that the way that humans shape the physical world around them provides a rich source for historical enquiry. The Victorian gift book is a physical manifestation of the relationship between an author and a reader and although we like to think of reading as a cerebral activity, it is also a material experience that takes place in the physical world: a book is

a crucial experiential element of this process, not just a neutral medium through which literature is communicated. With this in mind we might ask what 'monograph' means in the absence of physicality? While an e-book might have all the structural qualities of a physical book, it will never have the same experiential qualities and our sensory engagement with the different formats is fundamentally different. If I applied my research methodology to our current situation I might be tempted to ask some worrying questions: will our experience of a given e-book be determined by the device we read it on? Will the screen size be as important a factor as the content of the monograph?

## Why do monographs still matter?

After working hard on my institution's submission for REF2014, I am left doubting that the monograph is the most efficient way of maximizing scores in a research audit, but I still want to write books. Despite its historical baggage, a monograph is an effective vehicle for articulating a sustained argument; a good monograph should be more than the sum of its parts. And this is why a monograph carries prestige – it needs to be based on a substantial and coherent body of research, something not necessarily true of a collection of journal articles. This is particularly true of the humanities. Nigel Vincent has described the perceived value of a humanities monograph very clearly, but I think we should add a further cultural factor.<sup>6</sup> From doctoral study onwards, a humanities researcher is likely to 'own' their research in a way that is rare in other disciplines. Due to the paucity of humanities research funding, many doctoral students in the humanities are self-funded. One of the very few advantages of this situation is that the researcher is less likely to be providing a segment of a larger pre-determined research project, and consequently has more autonomy with both the subject matter and the direction of the research. This sense of independence persists throughout humanities research culture and its ultimate expression is the monograph, the first milestone that many PhD candidates attempt to overcome after graduation. After all, if the academic monograph is no longer valued, why do we require an 80,000-word thesis from a doctoral student? The form of humanities doctoral thesis closely echoes that of the monograph. Guedon has argued that the book is fundamentally a piece of historical baggage that restricts scholarly dialogue and commits academics to unnecessary labour and while this is true in one sense, his argument does not necessarily negate the positive role that the monograph can play.<sup>7</sup> The monograph may be an artificial structure but it is one that we understand well, and through which we can articulate and receive knowledge very effectively. If we remove this structure it is not just the prestige of the author that suffers but the framework through which we evaluate effective scholarship: context may dominate content but how is removing or changing that context in any way useful?

"... a book is ... not just a neutral medium through which literature is communicated."

## E-books and the OA model

While OA publishing necessarily excludes the advantages I have attributed to the physical book, it offers a whole series of advantages over the commercial e-book. The clumsy loan system with library e-books would be negated and as an author, I would anticipate a wider readership both within and beyond academia. Given that Palgrave Macmillan is already offering monograph chapters for individual download on Palgrave Connect, its e-book platform, I have a feeling that the commercial e-book will encourage the fragmentation of the monograph as a full-length study. Through being free at the point of access, the OA model could counter this tendency and encourage readers to see chapters in the context of the entire book: this could be a valuable contribution towards preserving the integrity of the monograph.

“... the OA model could ... encourage readers to see chapters in the context of the entire book”

Assuming that the OA arrangement included giving away a PDF of a designed e-book, authors would not necessarily lose control of the design process and, as the images would not incur printing expenses, all the images could be in colour. I don't know how these images would be licensed: the standard model for pricing images includes a statement of the print run and the size of image used, which would be difficult to apply to an OA book. I am due to find out more about this soon as my current monograph contract asks authors to negotiate this area with copyright holders.

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