Commonplace

5 Things to Think About with mediastudies.press director, Jeff Pooley

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I’ve been digging around in the history of scholarly publishing recently. It’s surprisingly fun. The best bits are the writings—some bilious, some breathless, others bloodless—that comment on the publishing system of the day. I thought I’d share five favorites, from the early nineteenth century through to the interwar era—all U.S. examples, alas. These are, in their way, the forerunners to the Scholarly Kitchen post, or UKSG Insights article, or listserv screed.

The debates we have today about our current, half-broken system are preoccupied with the present, or perhaps the near future. That’s as it should be. But it’s worth looking back at the manifestos and prognostications of earlier eras. There are lots of reasons, but the one that motivates me is to show that our current joint-custody arrangement—for-profit publishers and non-profit universities—is a recent and reversible development. It’s much easier to see that another publishing world is possible if we can see, first, how contingent and callow our current system is.

The remembered past of scholarly publishing goes back some 20-odd years, to Budapest and the early Web. Here, then, are a handful of postcards from the pre-PDF era.

1 // Impediments to Knowledge, Literature and Science, in the United States (1832)

Benjamin Franklin’s son, Benjamin Franklin, Jr., was a scabrous, spirited critic of the young country’s scholarly publishing scene. Writing in 1832 for the Atlantic Journal and Friend of Knowledge—itself a short-lived proto-journal—Franklin listed 25 problems with the publishing business. A taste:

4. In England patronage, cringing, and flattery are needed to help authors. In France and Germany some merit, besides cabals and intrigues. But hear much noise, scribbling, puffing and recommendations.

5. Authors despising these means, have no chance of success whatever, be their merit. The best men and writers must use them when beginners.

6. Thus booksellers are enabled to puff and sell the trash they deal in, and pamper or feed the depraved taste of misguided readers: while good books are neglected or not even known for lack of puffers.

7. Reviewers are seldom impartial, being guided by prejudices, predilections and venality.

So: Nothing has changed ;-)
10. The last remedy which we venture to suggest, consists in trying to induce our most ingenious men to endeavor to discover a mode by which a few copies of a work may be printed as cheap per copy as when many are printed. Although we cannot now see how this can be done, we know that almost nothing is impossible to modern mechanism and ingenuity.

He wasn’t holding his breath, however. Will the correctives redeem the “sad and appalling” state of publishing? “We fear not speedily nor adequately but nihil desperandum.”

The *Atlantic Journal and Friend of Knowledge*, 1832, where Benjamin Franklin published his “Impediments to Knowledge, Literature and Science, in the United States”

2 // Second Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution (1847)

A dozen years later, in 1847, Franklin’s complaints had an answer of sorts, with the founding of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Almost immediately, the Smithsonian’s first secretary, scientist Joseph Henry, got a robust publishing program underway. Thick annual volumes of the *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge* appeared from 1848 to 1916. Over its lifespan, *Contributions* published nearly 2400 monographs in “all branches of knowledge.”

What’s crucial is that *Smithsonian Contributions*, and the other Institution serials, were distributed for free and without copyright. Their costs were covered by Congress as a matter of founding principle—disbursed gratis—to all the country’s libraries and shared, too, with over two hundred learned societies and libraries overseas.

In his second annual report to Congress in 1849—my second item—Henry addressed the copyright question. “The knowledge which the Smithsonian Institution may be instrumental in presenting to the world,” he wrote,
“should be free to all who are capable of using it.” Added Henry: “The republication of our papers ought to be considered as an evidence of their importance, and should be encouraged rather than prohibited.” Thus copyleft principles—to apply anachronistic language—were *official government policy* 150 years before the first Creative Commons license was issued.

In his report, Henry noted an objection: that scholarly societies should be the ones publishing the *Smithsonian Contributions* monographs. “The answer is,” he wrote, “that the learned societies in this country have not the means, except in a very limited degree, of publishing memoirs which require expensive illustrations, much less of assisting to defray the cost of the investigations by which the results have been obtained.” The *Contributions*, he added, will enable “true genius, wherever found, to place its productions before the world, free of cost, and in a manner favorable for securing due attention and popular appreciation.”

Call it the Smithsonian precedent: open access *avant la lettre*, funded by government (cc: the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy).

3 // Synthetic Bibliography, with Special Reference to the History of Science (1920)

My *third item* is a spirited plan to tame what was, even in 1920, too much to read. George Sarton, the Harvard history-of-science field builder, was already curating his now-famous *Isis* bibliography when he published his
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1920 manifesto. The scholarly literature, he wrote, suffers from “two terrible diseases”: overproduction and what he called crumbling—by which he meant something like unwarranted specialization:

Some authors seem to have a real genius for disintegration. They find pleasure only in infinitesimal subjects. Some (I could easily quote names, but it would not serve my purpose any better to chagrin these otherwise good people) not only publish articles on the pettiest items, but they go so far as to print the tiniest chips of their studies, however incongruous they may be.

He’s less forgiving of the vain:

An author allows himself to publish immoderately because of the excessive importance he attaches to his smallest findings. Another is forever publishing short communications to keep himself in the limelight. He believes that an interminable list of publications will increase his prestige and possibly foster his academic advancement. The saddest part of it is that he is not entirely wrong in believing so.

What to do with all these “bad reports of silly investigations”? His palliative was the critical and selective bibliography, such as the one he was building for the history of science field. He also called for the reform of graduate education, in order to check “premature publication” among young scholars. Socrates, after all, “did not write anything.”

Synthetic Bibliography

With special reference to the History of Science.

The following notes have been written, chiefly for the use of the readers and collaborators of Isis, as a contribution to the solution of this practical problem: « How to prepare a good bibliography of the history of science? » It is clear however that they may also help to solve other similar problems, or the more general one: « How to prepare a good encyclopaedic bibliography? »

The title and first paragraph of George Sarton’s 1920 Isis article.

4 // A Suggestion as to Method of Publication of Scientific Papers (1922)

In a 1922 letter to Science—my fourth item—Rutgers zoologist W. J. Crozier proposed to ditch the journal altogether. The form, for most fields at least, has become “measurably antiquated” and “should be abolished.”
In its wasteful place Crozier called for the distribution of solo-article “separata.” Each “separate,” he explained, should be published “when it is ready,” and then assigned a unique “serial number.”

He predicted that the quality of scholarship would improve under his scheme: “A paper which from the first is to ‘stand alone,’ rather than be supported fore and aft by comfortable neighbors, is likely to be more carefully written, perhaps even more carefully thought out.” The cost, moreover, to cash-strapped scholars would likely fall. “One’s library shelves,” he wrote, “would no longer be encumbered with journal numbers which must be bound at ruinous expense or else remain unsightly.”

One hundred years later, and we’re still waiting for the great unbundling.

It may be suspected, as a conceivable result of the plan outlined, that the quality of the papers might be automatically improved. A paper which from the first is to “stand alone,” rather than be supported fore and aft by comfortable neighbors, is likely to be more carefully written, perhaps even more carefully thought out.

A paragraph from W. J. Crozier’s 1922 letter to the editor in Science.

Bonus item: A second 1922 letter, also published in Science, this one calling for data repositories. It’s too expensive, wrote Scripps researcher W. E. Allen, to publish “tabular, statistical or other exhibitive matter” in articles themselves. So that such supplementary material “not be lost to permanent record (where its value may be far superior to mere textual discussion),” Allen proposed placing mimeographed copies in “certain repositories designated because of their accessibility to those persons most likely to need such record.” One benefit? Researchers could deposit their results immediately. “The worker in such lines,” Allen wrote, “will not have so much reason to be discouraged by long delay in publication, following the monotony (and sometimes dreary drudgery) of making, accumulating and interpreting the records.”

5 // American Scholarly Publishing (1929)

My last and best item is Donald P. Bean’s American Scholarly Publishing, a rich and exhaustive report on the state of things circa 1929. Bean, then at the University of Chicago Press, outlined what had become, since the
late nineteenth century, the tripartite publishing system we know today: (1) commercial publishers, (2) university presses, and (3) scholarly societies. In that respect the book is a revealing time capsule. I’ll pull out a single table as illustration:

\[\text{TABLE IX.} \]

\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\text{Publishing Agency} & \text{Humanities} & \text{Social Sciences} & \text{Physical Sciences} & \text{Biolog. Sciences} & \text{Total} \\
\hline
\text{Commercial pub.} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} \\
\text{a. General} & 3 & 4 & 1 & 1 & 4 \\
\text{b. Specialized} & 3 & 4 & 6 & 7 & 25 \\
\text{Total} & 6 & 8 & 6 & 7 & 29 \\
\hline
\text{University} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{Total} \\
\text{a. With press} & 18 & 25 & 11 & 13 & 40 \\
\text{b. Without press} & 6 & 9 & 7 & 8 & 19 \\
\text{Total} & 24 & 34 & 18 & 21 & 59 \\
\hline
\text{Society} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{No. %} & \text{Total} \\
\text{Research inst.} & 36 & 52 & 44 & 53 & 146 \\
\text{Foundation} & 8 & 10 & 2 & 5 & 33 \\
\text{Individual, Govt., Bus.} & 2 & 3 & 6 & 7 & 20 \\
\text{Printer} & 2 & 3 & 2 & 2 & 4 \\
\hline
\text{Total} & 70 & 100 & 84 & 100 & 291 \\
\end{tabular}

A table from Donald Bean’s *American Scholarly Publishing* (1929), p. 15, with annotations added.

I’ve annotated Bean’s table, which details journal ownership on the eve of the Depression. Societies published half of all journals, with university presses accounting for another fifth. The commercial presses? Just 10%.

Bean (1895–1974) lived to see what happened next. In the decades after World War II, Pergamon and Elsevier bought or founded hundreds of journal titles. Today, of course, just five obscenely profitable firms publish most of the world’s scholarship. Bean’s ratios, in effect, have been reversed. In the two decades since Budapest, the oligopolists have managed to price out authors. Now they’re skimming the behavioral cream and selling that too.

If Franklin, Bean, and the others have anything to tell us, it’s that it doesn’t have to be this way.