OPINION PIECE

(wileyonlinelibrary.com) doi: 10.1002/leap.1042

Received: 20 June 2016 | Accepted: 29 June 2016

Why publish?

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Key points

- Digital technology should provide a context for publishing but by no means an endpoint.
- A pay-to-say model of publishing is not only exploitative but also dangerous because it makes the ability to say contingent on the ability to pay.
- How will publishers survive, and how will writers eat in a publishing environment increasingly oriented to free online content.
- There are no solutions to publishing, but more networked and fluid alternatives may be a way forward.

This article is based on my inaugural professorial lecture, given at Goldsmiths, University of London and timed in order to coincide with the launch of our new digital first – by which we mean digital-led – university press, Goldsmiths Press. My aim was to examine the politics of communication that attend the current conditions of writing, research, and publishing within the academy and beyond. I wanted to explore the 'why publish?' question when, on one hand, it might seem easier to list the reasons for authors and publishers to avoid doing so, and when, on the other hand, the answer would appear to be already known.

I had outlined these issues earlier during a session entitled 'The Making of a Modern University Press' at the London Book Fair. Asked why, together with my industry consultant Adrian Driscoll, I had decided to set up a new university press, I referred to the opportunities afforded by digital technologies and the new DIY spirit of scholarly publishing along with a set of concerns about scholarly communication that could now be actively addressed within the community. In addition to this, I indicated something specific about Goldsmiths as a liberal arts institution known for working across the boundaries of theory, practice, and performance. If we had so far been rather badly served by conventional academic and commercial publishing, we might stand to gain by exploring the possibilities of the new publishing landscape. As inaugurals are focused on an individual's trajectory, I was able to include another dimension here, namely my own motivation and sense of priority, which happen to stem from a background in English Literature; a stubborn refusal to accept the constraints of genre, style, and format; and a conviction that there is more to the future of publishing than it being online and open access.

My talk both challenged and adhered to the conventions of the form, combining anecdotes and arguments, reflection and projection in a manifesto for future publishing.

> 'In 2011, I published a novel, *The Optical Effects of Lightning* (Kember, 2011). It evoked nineteenth century encounters between literature and science – galvanism, mesmerism – and stemmed from frustration at the subsequent separation and specialization of the literary and scientific as if they must be held apart in order to protect their own and each others' purity. I wrote the novel I could no longer find or buy in the bookshops, and, to my surprise, since this was a strange fusion of popular science and literary fiction, a number of editors liked it. One invited me in to a well-known publishing house to tell me how much he liked it – this experiment in science and literature – apart from the bit with all the science in. The problem was not so much the fundamental incompatibility between science and literature, he told me, but rather who is able to challenge it; who is allowed to intervene. Andy Weir, author of *The Martian* (Weir, 2014), seems to me to have intervened, working his way through self-publication toward mainstream publication, albeit more in the genre sci-fi than in the literary mode. I was presented with a different kind of restriction. I was told that men don't buy books by women: as a female author I could only have female readers, and women, I was told, don't like science. Consequently, I was advised to take the science out of a science fiction novel. Did I? I'll come back to that.'

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As Anamik Saha (Saha, 2016) and Danuta Kean (Kean, 2015) have both pointed out in their research on publishing, and as a recent report by Spread the Word (Kean, 2015) makes clear, racism as well as sexism is reproduced off the page, if not at the level of editorial decision making, then at the level of infrastructure (through marketing strategies; publishing systems that classify and categorize like with like; through policies that privatize higher education, introduce exorbitant fees, and preclude those from more diverse ethnic and social backgrounds from becoming students and practitioners of writing and publishing). Discrimination happens on the page too, through citation and peer review practices that are becoming increasingly conservative in an academic culture dominated by auditing, metrics, impact, and professionalization. These mechanisms – they are control mechanisms – favour the already established author and the already established, tried, tested, applied, and preferably lucrative idea.

My entry into publishing was fuelled by the sense that while there is more productivity in publishing, there is less room for diversity, experimentation, risk taking, and intervention. These are the factors that motivate me. Novels and monographs continue to exist in abundance, if in all too recognizable forms. In many ways, I would prefer that the classic realist novel (the obligatory commercial form) and the standard 80,000 word monograph/textbook *did* become extinct, but digital technology did not kill the book in the way that it threatened to or promised. That is, not literally, but here's the problem here and now: if publishing continues to be dominated by commercial and professional productivity, if it serves only or mainly Amazon and our CVs, if it becomes any more of a monoculture than it already is, then the book, whether in its digital or print form, is a hollow commodity – if not dead, then undead. Books about zombies are one thing. Zombie books are quite another.

Even while this scenario is too apocalyptic, while it fails to take account of the genuine scholarship, creative invention and careful, dedicated publishing that continues to takes place, there is still a case to be made for action. As Goldsmiths Press enters the publishing environment to join other new university presses, such as UCL and Westminster, and other independent presses, such as Open Humanities Press, Open Books, Mattering Press, Mute and publishing and Meson, what we need – and are already to an extent evolving – is a collective manifesto for future publishing. All errors and omissions are of course mine alone. This is my take on what we are currently doing and, more importantly, why we are doing it.

A MANIFESTO FOR FUTURE PUBLISHING

Digital first, not digital only

Digital first is perhaps a misnomer as it implies an order of precedence within the publishing process. For us at Goldsmiths Press, digital first means something more like digitally led, where digital technology provides a context for publishing but by no means an endpoint. There is no simple transition or progression *from* print *to* digital publishing. There are, as Johanna Drucker has argued (Drucker, 2014), no magical 'pixel dust' solutions to the problems of publishing, and in any case, it has become apparent that people still like, and will still buy, print books. It's a sensory thing.

> 'The first book to be published by Goldsmiths Press is *Les Back's Academic Diary* (Back, 2016a). This has received glowing endorsements, and excerpts were published in *The Guardian* (Back, 2016b). It is, in many ways, a brilliant book, but when I proudly presented advance copies to my colleagues, they did, in public, what I suspect most of us do in private: they stroked the cover, sniffed the pages, and told me how beautiful it was.'

We know that books are sensory things. We still don't really know whether they might be a generational thing.

I spend a lot of my time pointing out – including to folks in the industry – the limitations of oppositional thinking and simplistic substitutions of this for that. The prospect of a digital revolution in publishing created a degree of paralysis or at least paranoia so that for fear of what the digital book could be and what it might mean (for authors, publishers, agents, readers, retailers, and so on), we clung on to the analogue book as we knew it – even in its digital form. There have been massive changes in how books are read and distributed – and indeed in the publishing process itself. Have there been equally seismic changes in what books are and in what publishing therefore is?

I don't mean to signal any kind of essence or goal here. My point is precisely that there isn't a neat and forever from–to scenario. Historians of the book and of publishing point out that they are not just contingent on the development of technologies before and after the printing press but also on social norms and ideas, for example, about property (the book as an object you own) and identity (the author, the reader), but these ideas, and others, have changed over time, and if books and publishing are social phenomena, subject to change and not fixed essences, then, as Janneke Adema and Gary Hall have pointed out (Adema & Hall, 2013), they are and have always been contestable, for example, through experiments with artists books, feminist publishing, and now, possibly, open access publishing where books are made free and open to reuse.

As I said, I do not seek to preserve or conserve the book in its standardized, zombified form. I feel the same about the scholarship and the writing that feeds it. That is, the scholarship and writing that is a factor of increasingly impossible, unsustainable conditions of possibility within the academy and outside of its still relatively protected walls. We call these conditions of possibility neoliberalism, meaning the triumph of economic value over all other values.

Publishing is due a re-evaluation. If we really could get over our fears and fantasies, our technophobias and technophilias, we'd see – and are, I think, starting to see – a much-expanded landscape for publishing, albeit with very few landmarks, (information super) highways, and signposts but with plenty of potholes. If there is an emerging 'structure of feeling', as Raymond Williams would put it (Payne & Rae Barbera, 2013), or dominant way of thinking about digital first rather than digital only publishing, it seems (paradoxically) to have started with looking again, in a digital context, at once new, provisional, provocative but largely analogue forms like the essay, the pamphlet, and the manifesto. Goldsmiths Press will be publishing these and others besides, but not as ends in themselves.

Open out from open access

There's an argument that manifestos have changed, shifted from being radical to being more reflexive, from issuing orders and injunctions – like open out from open access – to thinking about who is issuing them and to whom, but again, this sense of change is too tidy for me. One of my favourite manifesto writers is Donna Haraway. She manages to be both radical and reflexive, capturing both in mottos, such as for her *Companion Species Manifesto* (Haraway, 2003) – it's about dogs, or rather, it is written by and addressed to human–dog companion species – 'run fast, bite hard'. Much as I like this, it wouldn't do much for books. Publishing fast and hard is a significant part of the problem. Horribly high percentages of journal articles and books are published but not cited and hardly read. Yet I'm not convinced that the alternative is, as others have suggested, to go slower and softer. The motto I'm working my way towards – as we'll see – has more to do with writing and what books can still do. It is more about transformation and less about speed.

So, this bit of my manifesto relates to my research, with Janis Jefferies, on UK policy and, specifically, reform agendas around copyright and open access. I'm critical of both top–down and bottom–up, policy-driven economic agendas and grassroots agendas for copyright and open access reform in publishing. While there are obvious benefits, these are inseparable from the drawbacks. The grassroots or scholar-led open access movement rightly challenges the spiralling costs and price barriers put up by commercial journal publishers in particular and the fact that they are draining library budgets while profiting from academic free labour (writing, reviewing). They are also turning, increasingly, to open access business models that charge those same authors – that ask them to pay a substantial fee – for publishing in journals they already subsidize.

A pay-to-say model of publishing is not only exploitative but also dangerous because it makes the ability to say contingent on the ability to pay. At this point, we have to ask who is able to pay and who is not. What is the additional or hidden price in terms of academic freedom? Open access policy has worryingly little to say about the diversity of the book, let alone of the voices, projects, and subject areas that are allegedly made accessible. For me, both ends of the debate, from government to grassroots, conflate access and accessibility. Being able to read a piece of research – because it is free and online – doesn't necessarily make it readable. Whether or not all research should be accessible in this way, my point is that openness is not an endpoint. Job done. More than that, the claim that it is a public good is questionable when transparency (think about government) masks all sorts of opacities and when the words 'public' and 'good' are too often associated with 'free' and 'market'. Openness is designed for the public sector – or what's left of it – on behalf of the private sector. Open means open to commercialization. This, for me, is not ethical. Neither is it sustainable. The grants that are available to support author payment schemes, especially the block grants, are small to non-existent nationally, and even if the European Union (EU) has a pot of money – and even if it remains accessible to UK citizens post-Brexit – I wonder how and whether that pot gets refilled.

So I don't think the author pays model of publishing – a simplistic substitution of the reader pays model – has any place in the academy because it relies on a degree of financial support that governments may extend to STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering, and maths – but not to arts, humanities, and social sciences. If we go for it, or to the extent that we have already gone for it, we may be shooting ourselves in the foot. Openness is not all about processing charges of course. It also means the removal of copyright restrictions – all rights reserved – but copyright restrictions mean different things for big commercial publishers, on one hand (who've done all too well on them), and small independent or institutional ones on the other (that may need them just to survive). In our research project for CREATe (Centre for Copyright, Regulation, Enterprise and Technology, CREATe, 2012), the centre for copyright reform, Janis Jefferies and I have been asking not only how will publishers survive, but how will writers eat in a publishing environment dominated by open access and in a culture increasingly oriented to free online content.

Aggressive reforms are justified through commonsense statements about the need to give the public access to publicly funded research. Goldsmiths Press will attempt to do this by placing work in searchable archives and repositories that will hopefully, one day, link institutions and generate a diversity of research commons. Research commons would develop the theme of creative commons (the share alike scheme), but the antagonist in this case would be the commercial enterprises like academia.edu versus copyright per se. Academia.edu is not, as its name suggests, a university or a network of universities. It's a for-profit company. With about 30 million registered users, it is popular with scholars and members of the public who want to read their work, but it exists for its investors and feeds nothing back to its members and their institutions in terms of financial resources. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick knows, because of her work on developing a commons with the Modern Languages Association (https://commons.mla.org/members/kfitz/), it will be hard to compete with this sort of venture capital and with what is also an extremely well-funded social networking site, but if anyone should be providing a viable, sustainable alternative to gated university libraries, surely it should be the universities? DIY scholarly publishing (a form of self-publishing) has to include its own infrastructure. Building this will require investment and collaborative intervention more than commonsense. Commonsense, as we learn from reading Roland Barthes, is congealed and concealed ideology. That ideology turns openness into commercial enclosure. It opens culture and knowledge to industry and private investment. This is why the research audit for 2020 obliges academics to use a commercial licence.

We need to open out from open access, not just because open is closed but because openness is not the universal good it claims to be. It not only further divides Google (not obliged to be open) from Goldsmiths (obliged to be open); it effectively feeds us to them.

Intervene below the line

Not everything that matters about publishing concerns the form of the book or the reform of the industry. As I mentioned, we need to look at the infrastructure and the many mechanisms that reproduce inequality, precarity, anxiety, and ill health off the page and 'below the line', as Carol Stabile puts it (Kember, 2014).

Carol edits a journal called *Ada* (http://adanewmedia.org), and she has helped to pioneer a shift from an anonymous system of peer review that is too often abused and abusive to a more transparent, community-based system of peer-to-peer review. While this has had its rewards, Carol reports that it is also free labour-intensive, and so the experiment, the intervention goes on. In the mean time, she and her co-editors have begun a process that other grassroots open access publishers are also exploring, namely, how to turn what a recent UK report calls The Metric Tide (Hefce, 2015).

This suggests that something called responsible metrics is possible and desirable even while it acknowledges that attempts to measure, to quantify our research and its impact have so far failed and have in fact contradicted other, narrative forms of assessment, especially when it comes to early career researchers and women. Oh well, 'no matter', as Beckett would say.

If this is responsible metrics, perhaps what we need is irresponsible metrics. The ones we have are absurd. I believe there may be solace, may be some strategy in re-invoking the theatre of the absurd. So here we are, with Beckett's character Molloy telling us something about the current, possibly obsessive, increasingly obligatory quest for self-knowledge through numbers and diligently engaged in the quantification of his own farts:

> 'One day I counted them. Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes. It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all. I should never have mentioned it. Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself.' (Beckett, 1979)

Crisis, what crisis?

This phrase proved problematic for the Labour Government of the 1970s, but there is something between losing your head in a sense of crisis and simply burying it in the sand, and I prefer to deal in absurdities rather than crises if possible. It may be easier to invoke (as we do) a crisis – in publishing, scholarship, the humanities, the academy – than to investigate a politics of the absurd, but it's also, again, a bit paranoid. We need to realize what kind of endgame we're in.

The underlying structure of paranoia is splitting and the projection of good feelings and bad. There is, in general, a good feeling about openness and a bad feeling about copyright and cost. These feelings are legitimate, and yet we know that it is not that simple and that the good and bad are mixed. That means that we can still extract, fight for what is vital and experimental, for example, within what is institutional and instrumental. It's not that easy for me to acknowledge that Goldsmiths Press is, inevitably, a mixed blessing. It becomes part of an environment in which scholars must publish or perish as they always have but are obliged to earn their living through ever more competitive, individualized, quantified, and audited publishing, while artists and writers struggle, more than ever, to earn a living at all, but, to borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway, we need to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) we're in. I do acknowledge this trouble as the only hope of being able to do anything about it. Goldsmiths Press, as a new university press coming out of a liberal arts institution to which the label 'radical' seems to have stuck, is uncomfortably perched between the (idea of the) institution and whatever is deemed to be on the edge of it, on the outside, but is our task really so contradictory? The press will ultimately only amplify and curate – in the good old fashioned sense that Michael Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 2016) ascribes to contemporary as well as legacy publishing – something we've always practiced here, namely, the art of being disreputably reputable.

Take responsibility for companion species

My next two, very brief injunctions recognize the perspective of what Samuel Weber refers to as the 'exception' rather than the 'universal' in humanities publishing (Weber, 2000). They relate to who currently matters least but who might come to matter most in turning the Metric Tide.

Right now, PhD students and early career researchers take the brunt of internal contradictions and mixed messages about the values of training and of education, self-PR and scholarship, being employed and being inspired. New forms of publishing might help us create space for something in-between. Of course, taking responsibility for companion species, the human kinds, within and beyond the academy, would have to include finding ways to involve a more diverse array of people in the invention of these new forms of publishing, enabling them to engage in the politics of communication rather than seeing them as either benefactors or victims. One of the challenges for Goldsmiths Press is to find ways of engaging with innovative student writing, publishing, and performance. Our forthcoming poetry pamphlet series, which puts undergraduate and postgraduate work alongside that of established poets, is just a start. Once we recognize different career stages, careers (artist, academic), and stakeholders as essentially companion, the spaces for invention start to open out – for example, in what an artist-academic book might look like or in what networked feminist publishing could be. If this space is less simplistically oppositional, it is yet to be contested, and the point of having wider and interlinked perspectives is, to cite Weber again, ‘a new order of rank’.

Work harder here, unwork there

In his *Academic Diary*, Les Back suggests that the point of metrics is partly to make us ‘feel like we are failing even when we are killing ourselves to succeed’. One response to the gendered inequities of labour in academic and other theatres of work is to go back to Valerie Solanas’ 1970s manifesto of unwork (Solanas, 1983). This is a radical feminist manifesto that, to my surprise, resonated with one of the academic lawyers (male) I worked with on CREATe (Centre for Copyright, Regulation, Enterprise and Technology). Writing about copyright and comics in the form of a comic and pointing to the £820 million profit commercial journal publishers made on the back of academic free labour in 2007, Ronan Deazley is driven to speculate: what if we ‘withdraw content and expertise’? (Deazley & Mathis, 2013).

This might be tempting, but it would be difficult even for established academics and perhaps too risky for those whose careers still depend on publishing in those very commercial but yet reputable outlets. Until we change the criteria for employment, promotion, and auditing, or possibly as one means of doing so, I have advocated not so much a boycott but a rerouting of labour to less exploitative publishers over whom we have far more control. The problem of work is not erased here, even if we achieve a critical mass, but it might at least be reworked from the perspective of the exception. If unworking really means shaking things up (and shaking is not quite the word that Solanas used), then we do that better from the inside – by working as publishers rather than, or as well as, working for them.

Write!

So now we get to the heart of the matter, and for me, that is about re-evaluating writing in a culture of instrumentalism. To paraphrase the great feminist writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous, the question is not what writing *is* but what it can still do – to change things (Cixous, 1985). The assumption is that writing was never just words (or sounds, or code etc) but also a remaking of worlds that happens when we occupy the spaces between opposite things. It is about getting in-between what is vital and instrumental about writing. Its about inhabiting, bodily and with as many like-minded others as possible, the bit between where writing lives and dies.

Now, in this talk of life and death, I could be, but I’m not getting at a division between creative and academic writing. respectively. My point is that there isn’t one. It may be true that the professionalization of academic writing has not flattered it and that we’ve had to substitute the more writerly, discoursive forms, such as the essay, for the more measured and measurable – largely unread and unreadable – quasi-scientific journal article. Method, results, discussion, conclusion doesn’t translate to arts and humanities any more than science-based funding and publishing models do. The playing field is not level. Difference persists even when two cultures are more entangled than split.

Recognizing this unequal, differential relation (the ultimate impossibility of a monoculture) is more important than condemning academic writing style and obliging ourselves and others to ‘be more creative’, as Angela McRobbie puts it (McRobbie, 2015), especially at a time when creativity is being co-opted to mean commercial competitiveness. When Joanna Zylinska and I spoke of creative critique in our book *Life After New Media* (Kember & Zylinska, 2012), we spoke against such co-option. If the current conditions in which we write urge us to be more scientific, to have more measurable impact, to be more commercially competitive, then what can a more writerly and rebellious, less provable and approved, less right – in the sense of correct – kind of writing still do? I’m interested in the tension between rightness and writerliness because of its rebellious heritage and political potential.

Writing is an important antagonist in a culture that wants us to be both right and real – because those things are easier to count, easier to measure, value, and compute. Writing is also important in a culture that seeks to automate and erase speech and writing in the name of smart technological progress. Smart environments are increasingly intuitive, gestural, and visual. No writing required. ‘Less words = more fun!’ as Gary Shteyngart writes in *Supersad True Love Story* (Shteyngart, 2011). We are supposed to communicate, in the very near future, by turning our heads or clapping our hands, but in the novel I’m writing now, *A Day in the Life of Janet Smart*, Janet is an unlikely, already overworked superhero who challenges this corporate and computational future, and writing is her superpower.

Books can still change us and bring new things to life

This is a quote from a book by Lindsay Waters called *Enemies of promise*: *Publishing, perishing, and the eclipse of scholarship* (Waters, 2004). It was published in 2004 by Prickly Paradigm Press, which produces (very nicely) short, polemical essays and manifestos. My manifesto speaks back to his. Lindsay Waters is an established editor in humanities at Harvard University Press. While I was sometimes inspired, sometimes offended but certainly duly provoked by his manifesto, what I’ve been offering is more a view from the outside and a certain advocacy for taking on the perspective of the exception in publishing.

I want to end by answering the question I raised at the start. Did I take the science out of my science fiction novel? Did I mention that this might be a politician’s answer? I wrote a book about how books can still change us and bring new things to life – and I took the prospect of bringing things to life quite literally. Stories, writing, language are increasingly dismissed as insufficiently real and material (or too parochially human). The economic worldview, the austerity worldview is partly about unmediation, facing up to the world as it is, getting real, manning up – not making things up. Sometimes, as theorists, we go along with this idea, turning to objects, materiality, to a progressive kind of post human and so on, as if the solution to the problem of making changes in the world could be found by substituting physics for politics or lists of things that just are for stories about who and what might be, but I don't think so. For me, stories were always real in the sense of being fully and tangibly bound up with our very beings and becomings, bound up socially and psychologically and, in a way I might have exaggerated slightly, physically. Almost all of my stories are about the inseparability of stories and the lives they tell. Invariably, the characters most affected are the ones who deny this connection, those of us who use words as if they did not already – and again, literally – matter.

The Optical Effects of Lightning deals with the transformation through lightning and electrofusion (big sparks, little sparks) of cells, books, and bodies. It's a book that plays fast and loose with fact and fiction, and instead of giving readings, I've given performances where the audience are left wondering which is which. I've developed a knack (it is not a lucrative one and has done nothing for my CV) for fake documents and hoaxes or what I prefer to call ambiguous forms of knowledge, such as an open letter on the subject of life on Mars (Kember, 2013) or a protocol for human cloning (it includes methods, results, discussion, conclusion) (Anonymous, n.d). The open letter is about the discovery (twice) of a Martian microbe, and the protocol should work. True or false, fact or fiction? I don't know. Both. Neither. The point of the book is not to be either made up or measurable but to bring new things to life and what is alive; what matters is what is happening (present tense only) in the spaces in-between.

There are no solutions to publishing, but there are better problems to be sought somewhere between say, monographs and manifestos, the familiar, reassuringly solid and smelly form of the print book and the more networked and fluid alternatives that are being explored now. I'm a harsh critic of open access as a publishing model, business model, and false claim, but there are different kinds of openness and different claims that promise more for the future than either the fantasy of free knowledge/free culture or the reality of an increasingly proprietorial one. Goldsmiths Press is officially partnering with MIT Press for marketing, sales, and distribution. It is also part of an informal consortium of other new university and independent presses, incorporating open access publishers, university libraries, archives, museums, and galleries. I'm interested to see what our collaboration can do to offset cooperation, as Gary Hall puts it, with the current terms and conditions. The goal of publishing, for me, is to reinvent rather than reinforce who counts in publishing and what counts as publishing – and of course to re-evaluate the why question.

(And the answer to the other question (did I or didn't I) is yes, and no.)

Motto: books do still change us and bring new things to life

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Learned Publishing published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of ALPSP.