

The First Book Project: A Disruptive Process for Creating Scholarly Monographs in the Social Sciences and Humanities

David W. Lewis
December 2005

Introduction

This proposal applies the work of Clayton Christensen and his colleagues to the problem of creating scholarly monographs in the social sciences and humanities.

The usual explanation for demise of the scholarly monograph is the decline in the academic library resources available to purchase scholarly monographs that has resulted from the large increases in the cost of scientific journals. While this has certainly played a role, why is it that scientific journals have maintained their pricing power, while the scholarly monograph has not been able to do so? Christensen would argue that the customers for the scholarly monograph were overshot, that is the product had exceeded the needs of its customers — libraries and scholars — and they will no longer pay the price premium for the increased quality of the product. Because of this established academic publishers have attempted to move upmarket by producing higher quality books for smaller and more exclusive markets (soliciting philanthropic support for some projects) or to move into other markets. At this point both strategies have exhausted themselves and the scholarly monograph, and maybe academic presses, are an endangered species.

Christensen would argue that in this situation the possibility for a low-end disruption with a new value proposition to create a product that serves the overshot users. This paper is an attempt to provide a model for such a disruptive strategy.

Strategy: Covert dissertations into first books. By using dissertations the manuscript exists and has been vetted to some degree and authors are highly motivated to create a first book quickly. The aim is to focus the time of the author so that books can be created in less than a year, and to create a cheap product that is good enough by outsourcing all possible aspects of creation, production, and distribution of the book.

Principles:

1. Repeatable production cycle of one year
2. Maintain very low overheads
3. Outsource everything that can be outsourced and move all possible overhead costs to first copy costs
4. Do not maintain an inventory

5. All first copy costs will be covered before first copy is produced
6. Books will be priced as low as possible — the goal is 50% of the comparable book published by established academic publishers
7. All postproduction income after variable unit production and distribution costs are covered will be split 50/50 between publisher and author

Process:

1. Each fall run a contest to identify the 100 best dissertations in the social sciences and humanities. Applicants are required to provide reviews of their dissertation and gain a commitment from their institutions to provide financial support for the author's participation in the process. Applications due by November 1.
2. Authors notified of selection by December 1.
3. Selected authors submit a manuscript of a proscribed length (Between x and y pages) by March 1. Including list of items requiring rights. Participation fees due. Failure to make this deadline results in being removed from the program. A wait list would be maintained.
4. Manuscript is reviewed by external reviewers paid for their services by May 1.
5. Manuscript is copy edited by freelance copy editor by May 1. Automate using spelling and grammar checking software to the extent possible.
6. Rights for imagines, etc. cleared. By May 1. There would be a fixed budget for such items.
7. Copy edited manuscript and reviewer's comments returned to author.
8. Author revises manuscript before she/he attends "Book Camp." Revised version due one week before the beginning of their "Book Camp" session.
9. "Book Camp" sessions begin June 15.
10. "Book Camp" sessions end August 15.
11. Books go into production September 1.
12. Start next year's contest on September 15.

By creating an annual production cycle with all books moving through the cycle in lockstep, production efficiencies are maintained. Focus on developing a process that drives authors and editors to quick decision-making. Prompt completion of a significant number of good, though not necessarily excellent, scholarly monographs is the goal.

Contest

Eligible authors would have completed their dissertation within three years of the contest submittal date. Authors would submit a ten-page summary of their dissertation work. They would also submit three reviews of the dissertation. At least one of these reviews would have to be from an institution other than where the dissertation was earned or where the author is currently employed. Authors would need to have an institutional commitment to pay the costs of participating in the project.

A review process which involved project selected reviewers would rank the works. There would likely be quotas for various disciplines.

“Book Camp”

“Book Camp” would be a seven to ten day intensive retreat for 20 to 25 authors at a time. The object of “Book Camp” is three fold. First, it creates a time and process for the author to finish the book. All books are finished at the end of “Book Camp.” Period. No exceptions. Second, “Book Camp” provides an experience than will allow authors to develop a relationship with the publisher. Finally, “Book Camp” is an experience that can justify significant institutional investment in the author (or grant support). This positions the cost as an experience rather than the subsidy for first copy cost that it really is.

“Book Camp” would be held at a college campus or retreat center that would be relatively inexpensive and where it would be difficult to avoid concentrated work. It would be expected that authors would have to work eight to ten hours per day. Attending “Book Camp” would be authors and the professionals who are required to finish the book. This would include copy editors, book designers, indexers, etc. Authors would go through a program that would educate them about book making and guide them through the process of finalizing their book. Choices might be constrained. For example, there might be on a small number of book design templates. A generic cover art would be used.

At the end of the camp there would be a party.

Production/Distribution Process

Manuscripts would be input into the production system when submitted by the author and all versions of the manuscripts would be maintained in the system. At “Book Camp” access to the system would be available to all parties.

All books would go into production on September 1.

All book production would be print on demand. Books would never go out of print.

Versions of the book would be provided to as many e-book systems as possible. E-books provide a better margin and so should be aggressively pursued.

Fulfillment would be outsourced to Amazon and/or Blackwell.

If possible production would be outsourced to the same organization(s) that provide fulfillment. Ideally, the print-on-demand equipment would be located in warehouse of the fulfillment agent.

Promotion

A limited number of review copies (five to ten) would be purchased and distributed to standard review sources. Copies would be deposited in the Library of Congress for cataloging and copyright purposes. Information on the title will be provided to book vendors, etc.

The full-text of the book will be mounted on the publishers website to provide access through Google, etc. that will push sales. This would be done in manner similar to the National Academy Press.

The project imprint will be “First Book Project – Class of *x*.”

Why Would an Author Apply for and Participate in the Program?

Many of the authors would have trouble getting a book contract from an established academic publisher, especially this early in their academic careers.

While this process will not provide as finely edited and produced book as would be expected by an established academic press, the whole process will take less than a year. It is expected that many, if not all, beginning academics, need to turn their dissertation into a book. It is also assumed that the ability to complete this task in less than a year would be exceptional and would allow authors to quickly move on to new projects and that this would provide them with a significant competitive advantage.

Being selected to participate in the program by itself would be an honor.

Gaining an institutional commitment to compete to participate in the project would indicate departmental and institutional support of the author’s work.

This advantage should also be worth investment in and support by colleges and universities, especially department chairs who would want to provide the means of success for their new hires. The cost is not unreasonable when you consider that some open access journals charge half of this amount to accept a single journal article.

Royalty payments would be better than established academic publishers.

Would the Books Published Have a Market?

While the top academics might prefer to get book contracts with established academic presses, it is assumed that there is a tier of good academic work that if published in this way would find a limited market for paper copies in the academic library market.

In e-book collections, such as NetLibrary and ebrary, demand is based on topic as much as author or publisher name recognition. This is probably also the case for approval plans, especially for large academic libraries. Books could be sold as a series to encourage standing orders in both print and e-book markets.

Besides, since first copy cost are covered before the book goes into production and since the project has few fixed costs failure to find a market for a particular title carries little risk.

Budget Principles

1. All first copy costs would be covered by author/institutional fee or “scholarships”. These fees will be collected before the book is published.
2. Aim at keeping overheads for program management at less than 25% of total project costs on an annual basis.
3. All residual income from book sales (after overhead is covered) will be put toward “scholarships” for authors to participate in the program. Any grants would also support author “scholarships.”

Keeping Focus on the Disruptive Nature of the Project

1. The hard problem in academic publishing is no longer selecting, creating, producing, promoting, and selling scholarly monographs. The hard problem now is to do so quickly, from the author’s perspective, and to do so cheaply so that the amount of content published and its availability to readers is maximized.
2. Target non-consumption. Many of the authors who would participate in the project would not otherwise get their first book published this quickly. Established academic publishers do not want this business, preferring to deal with established authors, and would not be disappointed to see someone else take it.
3. Who is the customer and what is she/he hiring us to do? The customer is the author who brings the first copy costs to the table. The job she/he is hiring us to do is to get a first book out quickly and to make it cheaply and easily available to the largest possible audience.
4. Create a new process that changes the value proposition. The project will only succeed if the books can be produced with a value proposition that cannot be matched by established academic publishers. The model assumes a quicker time to market and a different economic model (covering first copy cost before publication and equal sharing of profits with authors) that established firms

cannot match. In fact, we would know we are on the right track if established academic publishers thought we were crazy.

5. Focus on making “profit” not on growing the project. The project processes and economic model must be made to work. If grant funding is raised it should be used to subsidize authors costs, not to cover overheads. Without the discipline to do this the processes and economic model will not be refined and perfected. The project needs to be sized to accomplish this. Bigger is not better until the processes and economic model are perfected.
6. Move upmarket. Once the processes and economic model are perfected, move to capture second and third books from established academic publishers. Relationships with authors should be maintained so that when they are ready to produce a subsequent book, they could do so using a similar process. Use former authors as reviewers and coaches or as “Book Camp” staff. Discipline would need to be maintained so that this does not lead to falling back into established academic publishing practice.

David W. Lewis is the Dean of the IUPUI University Library, 755 West Michigan Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202 dlewis@iupui.edu

© David W. Lewis, 2005