

**NOTE TO SELF:**

## Print Monograph Dead; Invent New Publishing Model

by MARSHALL POE

Not long ago I had an experience that occurs perhaps once or twice in a scholar's life: I saw the future clearly. I was in the midst of trying to publish a book on early Russian history. A book I had labored years to write. A book I needed for "advancement" in my profession. A book I knew only about 200 people would read in the next 200 years. I was having no luck, and then it happened . . .

"Dear Dr. Marshall, We regret to inform you . . .

Even before I had started, I had known that academic publishers are in a pickle. They are supposed to publish books by scholars in order to enlighten the citizenry of our democratic republic. Alas, our citizenry does not want to be enlightened, at least not by the kind of book I write. Who can blame them? The manuscript I was pitching was an exercise in the wildly esoteric. The title says it all: *The Russian Elite in the Seventeenth Century: A Quantitative Analysis of the "Duma Ranks," 1613-1713*. This book is about people who lived on another continent some half millennium ago; most Americans don't care about the neighbors they saw walking down the block five minutes ago. My mother wouldn't buy or read this book. It is little wonder, then, that I got a slew of letters from many "good" university presses rejecting my kind offers to publish with them.

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## Sidebar: How to Publish Your Monograph without Really Trying

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Remarkably, some of the editors liked the book -- "A monument to scholarship," "A *tour de force*," "An incredible achievement." But no deal: there is just no way, they said, to make any money on such a book. Not even the institutional purchasers -- libraries that are basically forced to buy obscure books -- could make my proposition profitable.

The printed monograph is dying.

What to do? I could have: 1) quit academia (which seemed like an attractive option, but academia currently pays the bills); 2) continue to search for a publisher until the cows came home (reality: there are no cows in Cambridge, so they never come home); or 3) publish the book myself (and risk eternal shame). I opted for the prize behind door number three, because I have no shame.

### **Fast, Cheap and Out of Control**

I like the Internet. It's colorful, inexpensive, and always open -- like an all-night dive in NYC. So I decided that the best way to publish my book was to use this remarkable new tool. But first there were some academic niceties to attend to. I had to have the book vetted (we have standards, you know). There are about a dozen people in the world who are actually qualified to comment on my book. So I just sent it to a couple of them as an e-mail attachment, asking for their honest opinion. I know, vetting is supposed to be "blind" so the reviewers can feel free to express themselves without fear of gun play. But since I was publishing my own book, this was difficult to organize. Scholarly societies are not set up to offer blind peer review for self-published books (but they should be); e-mail discussion groups could do it (but they don't); pre-print servers allow blind vetting of a sort, but sadly they don't exist in the humanities. So I was on my own.

The results were surprisingly good. I got many helpful comments and made all the changes the reviewers deemed necessary. I had a seal of approval and could proceed.

Next, I had to "make" the book. Many folks think it's hard to format a book. How do you make running headers, let alone different running headers for different sections? Happily, there are bunches of programmers on corporate "campuses" in California who have taken this problem to heart -- and solved it for the computer-illiterate masses. I sat at my Macintosh, armed with nothing but Microsoft Word and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and formatted my book in about four hours (not long, when you consider that it took me four years to write the thing). Title page (in living color), table of contents, running headers, index -- all to my specifications and all word-searchable to boot. (Of course, you can search for words in a printed book; it just takes a bit longer).

Now that I had an "e-book," I had to deal with the deadly "compatibility problem." You may think you don't know what the compatibility problem is, but you do. It's when someone sends you a file and you either can't open it or, when you do, it looks like a drunk monkey typed it. I don't know a bit from a byte, but I do know that there are two tried and true solutions to the compatibility problem: HTML and Adobe's Portable Document Format. Every time you view a Web page, you read an HTML document. So if you translate your word-processing documents (.doc, .wpd, or whatever) into HTML documents (.html), you have a document anyone with a

Web browser can read -- and browsers are free. In MS Word you simply push a button and your .doc file becomes a .html file. Try it and see.

But HTML can be ugly, and I don't like ugly. Adobe PDF is better: in essence this computer program takes a digital picture of the word-processing page, thereby rendering it static and astonishingly book-like. Turning a .doc file into a .pdf file is no more difficult than turning a .doc file into an .html file, but it does require a piece of software you (or someone else . . . ) has to buy: Adobe Acrobat. Once the .doc file is transformed into a .pdf file, anyone anywhere can read it with Adobe's free and incredibly widely distributed Acrobat Reader. You might already have it on your machine. Just look. If you don't, download it at [www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html](http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html).

I had my book in an attractive version almost anyone anywhere could read, so long as they had a computer and access to the Internet. Now, how to distribute it? Putting on my marketing cap, I attempted to find the "target audience." I did not use focus groups, cold callers, or mass-mail surveys, mostly because I didn't need to. I knew perfectly well who the audience for my obscure book on early modern Russian history was: early modern Russian historians.

By a happy coincidence, I had a list of them, or more exactly, an e-mail list of them. Several years ago I founded the "Early Slavic Studies List" -- an e-mail discussion forum on (you guessed it) early Slavic studies which you can join by [e-mailing me at mpoe@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:mpoe@fas.harvard.edu). The list is, by the standards of our sleepy field, wildly successful. About 225 scholars from all over the world subscribe to the list. That figure represents a major proportion of all the historians who could conceivably be interested in my book. So I sent a note to the list announcing the book and posted it on a Web page with my other publications. Go to [www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~mpoe/](http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~mpoe/) and see for yourself. The book is free for nothin' (as we used to say in Kansas).

I thought it might be a good thing to have my book reviewed in pertinent journals. I edit a journal myself, and I can tell you that organizing book reviews is like planning an invasion of Russia. It's a complex operation; you really have to be careful. First, you must get books from publishers, which ain't easy, as academic publishers are broke and don't like to give away their books. Second you have to find a reviewer, which ain't easy because book reviews -- though they are the most read items any academic will ever write -- don't count for much during departmental reviews. Third you have to send the book to the reviewer, which ain't easy because you have to hire a man in a blue uniform to *physically carry* the thing across river and dale. Then you wait, and wait, and wait.

Bearing this in mind, I decided to send my book to twenty or so journals as an e-mail attachment. It took me a half-hour to find the e-mail addresses, five minutes to compose a letter, and a nanosecond to send them the entire 350-page book. If they were smart, they would have sent the book to the reviewers by e-mail and demanded that the reviews be returned in the same way. But, alas, I can hear the printers running, laying waste to vast forests in the name of scientific progress.

Shortly after I sent the book for review, a very worried journal editor contacted me. He was upset that I hadn't included a copyright page on the e-book I sent him. Without a copyright page, he explained, any reader could copy my book, send it all over the world, or use it in the classroom -- all without my permission. That, I responded, was the point. (I'm not sure he got

it.)

### **Pictures of Lilly (the Digital Remix)**

As far as I can tell, the main use of the Internet is to distribute pictures of naked ladies. (I prefer pictures of vintage electric guitars, but that's another story.) A digital picture of a naked lady is still a picture of a naked lady. But, so many of my colleagues tell me, a digital book is not *really* a book. A book is made of matted sheets of pulpwood with black dye pressed into them, sewn between two pieces of cardboard. My colleagues work long and hard to write their books, and so when they are done, they want books. Real books. Books you can read comfortably. Books you can take on the plane. Books with clever little medieval crests on the spines. Books that can be displayed at booths in the cavernous halls of convention hotels. Books you can *show* people. I did not have that; my book was in the ether.

Just when I thought I had solved the monograph-publishing crisis, it smacked me in the face. I found myself in the same situation as the university presses -- I had to find a way to *print* my book and not end up in the poorhouse. What to do? Again, I faced three choices: 1) quit academia (the option still looked good . . . ); 2) search the world over for a publisher interested in quixotic adventure (been there, done that); or 3) publish the book myself (remember, no shame). And once again, door number three had the prize behind it.

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**"The old model -- big university press, big print run, big publicity campaign, big losses -- is deader than Elvis."**

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How do you print a book? Well, you could set up a print shop in your basement. I don't have a basement, and even if I did, my wife might not like the mess. Better to hire someone to print your book. With a little investigation on the Internet, I discovered that there are loads of folks ready to do this for you. They are called Printing Service Providers (PSPs). Now these PSPs are in the business of making money, so they are set up to handle all kinds of

customers: they can print 100,000 copies of the new Danielle Steel novel, or one copy of your monograph on Galician pottery makers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They can do this economically because they took the printing industry in a radical new direction. The PSPs, you see, *use computers*. You send them your book in electronic form (which you have in the box on your desk). They will edit it, format it, design a cover for it, and in general make it very sexy (all for a fee, of course). Then they put it on a server and print it, bind it, post it, and bill the customer as orders come in. This service is called Print on Demand, or POD, and it is revolutionizing the publishing industry (and not a moment too soon). Old school presses use offset printers to print large runs of books and store them in big warehouses. Then they sit on them while orders come in (or, in the case of my book, don't come in). The cost per unit to print a book in this fashion was relatively small (due to volume), but the cost of storing and distributing the book was great. Using POD, the PSPs print books only when they are ordered. One order, one book; two orders, two books, and so on. The cost per unit is higher, but the cost of storage and distribution is far lower. How much lower? I published a book with a university press a year ago -- it costs about U.S. \$50. If I publish my book with a PSP, it will cost about U.S. \$20. And it will never go out of print. Beat that, Oxford University Press!

### **Do Electronic Stacks Smell Musty?**

So much for the here and now. I had arranged for anyone presently on the earth and in contact with a computer to get my book. But, I thought, what about the there and then? How were future generations of early Russian historians (if there are any future generations of early

Russian historians) going to get my brilliant book? The answer was as clear as day: I needed to get the book into a library, preferably a very big one, one that would outlive me and everybody else. Luckily, I work about 100 yards from one of the biggest libraries in the world -- Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University. I marched right over to talk to the folks in charge about preserving my book for the ages.

Much to my surprise, they said this would be no problem. If the printed book was available via POD, then they would simply purchase, catalogue, and put it in the stacks like any other book. The electronic version of the book could be stored as well. The kind librarians explained that research library consortia are investing significant resources in the development of standards for the storage, update, and retrieval of e-books. In the not too distant future, they said, libraries would have huge electronic stacks in which enormous numbers of e-books could be searched, viewed, and downloaded from anywhere a patron might be. In fact, Harvard's system for storing e-books is up and running. All I needed to do was to send them the file and they would produce a universal catalog record for the book and store it on their servers. It is comforting to know that my book will be available to the reading public as long as Harvard University stands. Whether anybody will care to read is another, rather less cheerful matter.

### **The Future is Now (Almost)**

Historians hate to make predictions, especially about the future. But you don't need to be Karnack to see the way the wind is blowing in monograph publishing. The old model -- big university press, big print run, big publicity campaign, big losses -- is deader than Elvis. It just isn't working for anyone. A new model is presently emerging, as I discovered (quite accidentally, I should add). It will be hybrid in character, combining the best of the new electronic and print media. Monographs are already born digital (unless you use a typewriter), and they will soon be delivered digitally to the particular audiences that need them. The university presses may do this, or it may be done by scholarly societies, or even by individual scholars. Whatever the case, the e-monograph is on its way, so get ready to head to the digital library.

Print, however, has its enduring charms and will not just go away. POD technology will make it possible for those who love "real" books to buy them at reasonable prices. Again, it isn't exactly certain who will sell POD books -- it may be (and for reasons of status, probably will be) the university presses, it may be scholarly societies, or it may be the lone wolf scholar. Whatever the case, in the future you will order monographs like hamburgers -- made to order especially for you. Have them your way.

Of course there are those who feel that the death of the old model is a step backward into barbarity. These are the same people who feel TV is evil incarnate, computers are soulless machines, and pop lyrics aren't modern poetry. They will go away, and we will all be happier and better informed. This is not to say that there is no downside to the new world of academic publishing. For example, we book lovers will have to say goodbye to piles of cheap remainders in the basements of bookshops. In the e-book/POD world, every book will have an owner. But I for one will not be sorry to see even remainders go -- it's embarrassing to see your books there, languishing, unread, unwanted.

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Monograph by Marshall Poe

*The Russian Elite in the Seventeenth Century. A Quantitative Analysis of the "Duma Ranks," 1613-1713* [www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~mpoe/StatBK.pdf](http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~mpoe/StatBK.pdf) (2.09 MB)

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