



On Publication

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This discussion of publication is primarily concerned with Egyptological research, although many of the questions raised are relevant across a broad spectrum of subjects, especially in the Humanities.

The publication of academic research has long been regarded as an essential step in conferring value on the research itself. So often the unpublished state of an excavation, a monument or a museum collection has been cited as a failure in the sharing of knowledge. Without such sharing no further research can be advanced on the material, nor can the opinions expressed about it be subjected to critical analysis. Excavation without publication is regarded as destructive and worthless; this view was already current in the early days of Egyptology, at least amongst those who did publish. Another benefit of publication, noted equally early, was the concept of the published work as a permanent record of monuments which might be destroyed for one or another reason. This view has been validated many times by the number of vanished monuments whose only record is now on paper.

The above sentiments indicate that the purposes of scholarly publishing in archaeology may be defined as follows:

To document all classes of ancient remains as a lasting record, to research this material and advance theories about it, and to share this information widely so that others may take the research further.

This activity then leads to more publication, with additional information to be shared, and so the bibliography of the subject develops.

Who needs the publications?

Having defined the purpose of academic publication, it is then worth asking who needs it. Specialist publications are produced primarily for other experts working in the same field; more abbreviated syntheses are produced for the general interest reader and as such, have a much larger audience. The latter do not concern us here since their popular appeal allows them to be produced commercially and return a profit to their publishers. The academic reports, on the other hand, do not sell widely and are expensive to produce. In the early development of a discipline such as Egyptology, when the bibliography was still quite limited, it was possible for individuals to amass personal libraries of just about everything they needed. Those days are long gone and there is now insufficient time for scholars even to read what is produced let alone acquire their own copies. Individuals now only consult publications which they see as directly relevant to their own current research interests. As these interests change over time, they may move on to consult works which they did not use previously, but they

may also stop reading books they used before. This 'browsing' behaviour discourages the purchase of personal copies of publications, especially if they happen to be expensive, except for books which are so crucial to an individual's own research that their acquisition is deemed worthwhile. For the rest, they will be consulted in specialist libraries, in which any serious research has to be done in any case. Note the word 'consult', rather than 'read'. Academic publications are, for the most part, only skimmed for any data relevant to an individual's own research. This may be no more than a single illustration or line of text. Pursuing any research topic properly requires such brief access to a large range of published works, precisely the kind of activity suited to a library.

The consequence of this state of affairs is that everyone working in the subject wishes to have all the published information available for whenever they require it, but at any particular moment very few individuals actually do want it. Moreover, they are disinclined to pay for it.

This demand for free access to information on an occasional basis has been admirably met by academic libraries, which will continue to be essential tools of the future. But maintaining these resources for such intermittent use is again expensive, even for institutions. It is also extremely demanding of space, since books are bulky objects which require ever more shelf-space. Some prestigious volumes are anything but user-friendly, such as the huge tomes of Lepsius' *Denkmäler*, shown in the cover picture to this article.

What constitutes publication?

The definition of academic publication given above concerns only the documentation and interpretation of material and the sharing the results. It does not say anything about how this material should be shared. Since the printed book superseded the manuscript scroll, publication has come to be regarded as synonymous with the production of printed books as the vehicle for information sharing. So the activity (information sharing) has become confused with the medium (book publishing), and unfortunately books have come to be regarded as monuments to individual careers or desirable objects in their own right, rather than sources of information. A book may be described as 'a handsome volume', or 'a fine publication', where the product is not being assessed by its content but by its appearance: the glossy cover, the gilt-lettered spine, the leather binding.... The concept of the book as an object is seen at its most extreme with bibliomaniacs collecting books they never read, but keep only as trophies, to boast about: 'I have a first-edition copy of such-and-such a rare volume'. Before books, knowledge was shared by oral tradition, and then through handwritten papyri and parchments. The printed book was a major advance since it industrialised the production of data sources and brought information to a much wider section of the population. Books have served academic studies excellently for 500 years, and will continue to do so for many more, in view of their many excellent attributes. They are not, however, free from limitations, which are becoming more apparent as the sheer quantity of data being recorded increases.

The Reach of the Data

The content of an academic work is supposed to be available to anyone who may want it, but actual use is usually restricted to workers in the specific field. Editions of specialist books have never been very large, and have decreased over time as costs have risen. The fact that most of the books do not sell much beyond the demands of institutional libraries shows the limit of their circulation. Individuals, as mentioned above, will only buy a book if they feel it is central to their own work and they will need to use it regularly. But even then they may not buy it if the price is high, especially since use of a library is going to be necessary for serious research in any case. So we are left with the following situation:

Institution publishes book, an expensive operation to create around 300 copies. The sale price has to be high.

Initial sales (mostly to institutions) take up about 100 copies.

Remaining 200 copies have to be stored (costing money) for years, selling maybe one or two per year.

The publisher does not recoup the costs.

The whole operation puts only about 100 copies into the hands of users, via libraries, where the book may (or may not) be consulted, and individuals without access to specialist libraries will not see it. So the availability of the information is actually quite limited. Interestingly, it used to be better in the late nineteenth century, when a larger range of libraries subscribed to such volumes as the Egypt Exploration Society Excavation Memoirs, but now not only do these libraries not collect but many have ceased to exist.¹

The situation has changed to some extent recently through the increasing use of print-on-demand publishing. This frees the publishing institution from the initial outlay of producing a large number of copies at one time, in the hope of selling them in due course. Instead, copies are printed individually or in very small numbers as purchase orders are received. In this way, the revenue from sales comes in as the books are produced. This process has come about as a side-effect of electronic publishing, because the copies can be printed quickly from the finished digital file (usually a PDF document). Printing in this way is usually done on digital printers producing finished whole pages, instead of on the older technology of wet presses running off signatures of multiple pages in spreads.

Alternatives for information-sharing

Alternatives to publication in books have always been used, particularly exhibitions and

¹ For example, copies of EES Excavation Memoirs were once kept by the Bury Co-operative Society Library, in the north of England. Their presence in such institutions had much to do with the Victorian passion for education.

public lectures. In recent decades publication has moved to electronic media, the use of which is already widespread, although many of these outputs are still 'book-format' publications, usually electronic journals or downloadable PDF monographs.² At present the initial stage of a publication normally involves the preparation of a PDF file, which is essentially the same whether it goes to a printer to be produced as a book, or is placed online or shared on a CD. So, even if the latter route is chosen, it actually still is a book, but distribution is electronic and the job of printing it has been transferred to the user, if they wish to have a paper copy.³ Information shared electronically may, however, be formatted in completely different ways, without mimicking the book layout. This is much more suitable for certain types of data. Electronic distribution via the Web makes the information available to anyone on the planet with a computer and internet access, a far greater number than those with access to specialist libraries. The cost of providing the information is reduced because no stock of books has to be produced and stored.⁴ There could be a collective effort to set up websites for the publication of particular subjects, all the data on one topic going to one place, instead of being scattered through various monographs and journals. Such online resources have the advantage of permitting additions to be integrated in their appropriate places. The facility for electronic resources to concentrate data on particular subjects, and also to index the material for retrieval, is one of the major advances they offer over the printed book. Even with the use of certain published bibliographic indices, tracking down all information on a single subject in a library remains a massive task, and may involve looking through every issue of every journal, as anyone who has conducted serious research will know.

In the case of highly specialised fields of study, where the number of experts might be no more than a dozen or two in the world, the simplest option for sharing data would be for them to set up a system to exchange the results of their research freely amongst the group. It would make for more rapid transmission of ideas and probably serve as a stimulus to research, with no need to wait up to two years for an article to appear in a paper journal.

New means of data collection

If the results of research, especially of fieldwork, are to be shared effectively through electronic media then it makes sense to collect more in digital form in the first place. This change has already made some headway in the case of images, since almost everyone has moved to the use of digital cameras.⁵ The captured images can easily be shared, sometimes

² The electronic journal in which this paper appears is a case in point. The standard format is based on a paper journal layout, with all the illustrations at the end, when they should be integrated into the text in the appropriate places.

³ The file may be full colour and the user may decide to print in colour or greyscale. Using electronic distribution, perhaps more colleagues could choose to share their work free of charge, which will certainly gain a wider audience.

⁴ One form of book which is already in the process of being replaced is the academic museum collection catalogue, as museums put information about their collections online. Catalogues of special exhibitions, on the other hand, are generally commercial ventures and are thriving.

⁵ With the result that far more images are recorded than ever before. These need to be rigorously edited for publication, as many are almost exact duplicates and others often contain no information of value.

much more quickly than by publication of them in a book or even book-style PDF document online. Images may be uploaded to photo-sharing sites such as Flickr very quickly, just as video may be placed on YouTube. Although digital still photography has become standard very quickly, there is still little use of video on excavations. The actual detail of excavating a complex deposit or stratified sequence, if video-recorded, would create a record which would be far less equivocal than subjective site notes. One way to illustrate the value of video is to imagine its value had it existed in the past – if for example, Petrie's work at Naukratis was available on film, or Montet's excavation of the Tanis royal tombs. So many of the problems of interpretation which have been discussed at length in the literature would be resolved, because we would actually be able to see the details of the excavation as it happened. Now that we have digital video we should use it to record complex stages of excavation. The amount of time spent recording video would not be that great as it would only need to be applied to selected parts of the work; much of fieldwork is spent moving dumps, clearing topsoil and on other non-crucial activities. A commentary on the video would, of course be recorded as the excavation proceeded. The portions of the video which might be published could well be quite limited, or even none at all, but it would be an invaluable record in the excavation archive, available for consultation.

A final word on formats

Those reluctant to accept electronic data publishing frequently cite the problem of changing data-storage formats, which might render today's information unreadable by future technology. The disappearance of the old large-size floppy disk drive (and imminently, of the 3.5 inch drive), is cited as a warning. I have not heard, however, of anyone whose research work has been devastated by the loss of these formats, so presumably any valuable data was transferred to more modern media and preserved. This might mean that other data, regarded as of no value, was not so copied. But if it had no value, does it really matter? The management of data has always involved choices; the printed excavation reports of earlier years are (sometimes very) selective in what they contain owing to choices made in the editorial process. But so long as there is a demand for any particular information, it will be preserved to fulfil that demand, even if, in the extreme case, those creating the demand adopt the responsibility for the preservation of the data. If it matters to someone, it will last and will be migrated from format to format as needed. On the other hand, information for which there is no demand and in which no-one has any interest is likely to disappear, but if no-one reads it anyway, who would notice or care? Material of zero interest was never appropriate to record.