The book in the humanities and social sciences: a moving beacon

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ABSTRACT

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Two thousand five hundred years ago, a man coming from Hallicarnassos, a small city on the Aegean sea, in contemporary Turkey committed himself to a long enquiry related to the events and the causes of the recent war that took place between the Greeks and the Persians. His purpose was to “prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time, and to preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks”.

The man's name was Herodotus, and his book, the first scholarly book of the western scientific tradition, was The Histories. Writing his *Histories*, a masterpiece of 800 pages in its English translation, he not only created the genre of the scholarly book, but also positioned himself as the founding father of several humanistic disciplines: history, of course, but also geography and anthropology. Since then, Herodotus' findings were, as you know, intensively discussed, criticised, debated, and questioned by generations of scholars, from Thucydides to Tom Holland, the most recent English translator of the Greek historian.

If I chose to introduce Herodotus in the session about the book in the context of evaluation in SSH, it is to remind us of the breadth of the tradition that is currently supporting scholarly book publishing. It is a much wider and longer tradition of knowledge production than modern science itself and the more or less standardised editorial product that accompanies its development, e.g. the peer-reviewed scientific journal. Coming from a deep and diverse tradition, scholarly books are various in terms of editorial form (you have the monograph, the edited book, the editions, the textbook to take a few examples), but also regarding the way they are evaluated, even how they are read and discussed. The example of the Histories reminds us that scholarly books are not only read, cited and reused by scholars but also by a much larger audience. All these aspects must be considered when discussing the place and the role of the book in the evaluation of SSH.

Today, the discussion is influenced by several factors that are clearly perceived as challenges for the future of the book. Let me try to

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present them as a matter of introduction to our session.

The first challenge is rather structural: it is the marginalisation of the humanities and social sciences, and in particular the humanities, in the context of the rise of the techno-scientific model after the second world war and, recently, the impact of neoliberal policies on higher education and research systems in most countries. The implications are important: the specific needs and characteristics of those disciplines, in terms of practices, culture, quality control and impact, are less and less acknowledged, and it has implications for the book as one of the most important means of communication scholars in humanistic disciplines rely on, to convey the result of the research and submit it to discussion with their peers and the public.

The second challenge is of technical nature: it comes from the digitisation of the entire scientific information ecosystem, driving students and scholars of all ages to be used to access and consume scientific publications on screen rather than on paper. Compared to journal articles, books are much more difficult to digitise because of their length, complexity, and structure. And it is not only a technical hurdle. It is also a matter of ergonomy and, more largely, of a shift in the cognitive ecosystem that leads to a fragmentation of information, making it more difficult for large chunks of knowledge such as those conveyed by the book to find a place in the flow. Long to read and even longer to write, the scholarly book is constantly under threat in times of acceleration.

The third challenge is more political: it is about the adoption of open access policies by more and more institutions and research funders. So far, most of the stakeholders were very cautious about extending their open access policies to the book. In most cases, they acknowledge that, for various reasons, adaptations in terms of mandate, length, and modes must be applied. But then, the book is challenged by a dreadful alternative: on the one hand, it has to reinvent itself in the new open science context, in particular in terms of business model, and do it fast. On the other hand, if it does not, it is at risk of being simply wiped out of the landscape, not only in terms of access to funding because of non-compliance with open access policies but also in terms of usage, as more and more readers are used to access freely to resources without hitting a paywall.

To illustrate the kind of crossroads where the scholarly book is currently, let me share with you the details of two recent publications that shed a contradictory light on this situation. On the one hand, we have the famous Crossik Report, published in 2015 with the title: “Monographs and Open Access” [1] . Geoffrey Crossick, Distinguished Professor of the Humanities in the School of Advanced Studies at the University of London, was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in the context of the implementation of a future policy on mandating open access for books. One highlight of this remarkable report, acknowledged widely across the academic community for its relevance and accuracy, is to stress the crucial importance of the book to structuring knowledge production in the humanities and the social sciences. I would like to cite some sentences

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from the Crossick report that we probably should remember when discussing this topic:

“In many cases, the most effective way of communicating several years of sustained research on a single topic is to present it as a monograph. This does not preclude the publication of articles en route to the book itself, but the book has a special place in the culture of research publication. It provides the length and space needed to allow a full examination of a topic, with the objective of presenting complex and rich ideas, arguments and insights supported by carefully contextualised analysis and evidence. [...]. Writing a monograph allows the author to weave a complex and reflective narrative, tying together a body of research in a way that is not possible with journal articles or other shorter outputs.” But, according to Crossick, the peculiar role and nature of the book in scholarly communication in the humanities shouldn’t lead us to forget that it has a crucial role in knowledge production itself. Let me cite him again and for the last time:

“The term ‘thinking through the book’ emerged through the consultations, and it is a powerful concept, effectively reintegrating the research into the writing process itself. Monographs should not be seen simply as the way in which research findings are communicated because the act of constructing and writing a book is often a core way to shape the ideas, structure the argument, and work out the relationship between these and the evidence that has emerged from the research process. [...] Thinking through and writing a monograph can help the author to give structure to a body of research, to test out and analyse arguments, and to identify links to other areas of research and directions for future exploration. It would be wrong to claim that this process is unique to monographs, but it is a defining characteristic of them."

This latter point is extremely important, in my opinion, as it explains the role of the monograph to shape academic careers in some disciplines or sub-disciplines. Crossick enquiry is interesting as it establishes that there is no homogeneity across the disciplines considering the role of the monograph in allocating positions and promotions. The situation can be very different from one community to another; some committees require that the applicant publish a book or is in the course of publishing one, others do not. I will not go further on this topic as I know a roundtable is planned in the program of the conference, but I just want to stress here that in some cases, the publication of a book is a requirement because it is considered as an intellectual achievement that demonstrates the capacity of the applicant as a scholar and the maturity and advancement of their scholarship.

So, here's for Crossick and the importance of the book in certain disciplines. But now, let's balance it with an article published in 2018 by Vincent Larivière and Delphine Lobet in the *ACFAS Magazine*. Their article, published in French is titled : "La mort des livres dans les sciences humaines et sociales, et en arts et lettres?"[^2] . Using a very different methodology, the two authors tried to track the number of citations of books in journal articles and their evolution through time to assess if there is a positive or negative evolution of usage over a large period of time, measured by the number of citations. Using the Web of Science, they screened 26.6 million ALSSH articles published

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between 1980 and 2017, bringing almost one billion references to analysis. Their findings are quite astonishing and somewhat grim for the future of the scholarly book. Globally, they found a decrease in citations of books in contrast with citations of articles, particularly from 1995-2000. There are some exceptions, of course. For example, psychology doesn't cite books a lot from the start (38% of citations), and it doesn't change during the period. At the other end of the spectrum, literature cites mostly books (80%), and it doesn't change a lot throughout the years. It is more or less similar to some other disciplines, such as history, arts and religion. But for other disciplines, such as those in the social sciences, like management, criminology, urban studies, political sciences, and information sciences, the decline is sharp. One of the hypotheses the authors propose is that in these disciplines, contrarily to others in the arts and humanities, the books contain more frequently syntheses of state of the art on a topic; they present more rarely new findings (which are now published in articles). Therefore, researchers have a tendency to cite more often articles, where the new research results are made public, than books.

But Larivière and Lobet don't stay at this rather local level of analysis. They propose we consider 4 potential factors leading to this situation (the translation is mine): "1. Journals and books do not have the same accessibility. An article will be immediately accessible online and easy to find. The book, at best, will exist in digital form; however, its distribution, its indexation, and its "discoverability" by search engines remain problematic. 2. Books are victims of "publish or perish". In a context of pressure to publish, and even if the prestige associated with

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the book remains important and determining in certain cases (think of the American and British tenure), time plays against the book. In as many months, one will write several articles against a single book... which will be less cited. 3. In some disciplines, the article is better suited to the dissemination of research as it is practised. Economics, for example, has become an empirical discipline that does not need many pages in a book to develop. 4. The more researchers disseminate their work in articles, the more the bibliographies referring to their work will consist of articles."

What did we learn so far? On one hand, we know that the book plays a central role in some disciplines, mostly humanistic, not only for the dissemination of knowledge but also for knowledge production and its structuration. We know that for some communities, it is a remarkably constant characteristic across the ages, which explains that the book is still pretty much instrumental, for those communities, in the shaping of the academic careers and the evaluation practices for the distribution of positions and promotions. In terms of usage, we know that the so-called "crisis of the book" is not so obvious at a global level and that it is definitely not the case regarding global production. In fact, several studies showed that, even though there is a constant decline in terms of the number of copies sold per book, the total number is not declining because, at the same time, the number of titles published increases steadily. It would not be surprising that the multiplication of titles would actually be the reason why there is a reduction in the number of copies per title…

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But we have to balance all that with the undeniable decline of citations of books as opposed to articles in most disciplines during the last five decades. Once again, we should be careful not to provide interpretations hastily. The decline in the number of citations could mean a decline in usage or a change in the core functions that the book may be expected by scholars to provide. Whereas the journal articles may be used in the scholarly community as a means to disseminate fastly research results, then the book may be repositioned progressively for other functions. As Larivière and Lobet put it well, the publish or perish rule imposed by the standardisation of evaluation practices makes it more difficult for scholars to wait for several years before publishing anything. It then makes sense to publish articles with partial and precise research results which do not prevent exploiting them fully in a full book afterwards. What will be cited then will be the article rather than the book. In other words, when evaluating the place and the role of the book in contemporary scholarship, one has to consider not only the book by itself but the book in a moving environment where research and scholarly communication practices are changing globally and being reshaped differently. The scholarly book may have a relatively stable editorial form, its function may be different today than it used to be several decades ago, and it doesn't mean it should disappear.

In the Handbook on *Research Assessment in the Social Sciences* [^3] that colleagues published some weeks ago, there is a fascinating chapter dedicated to the specific question of the scholarly book. Of course, I will not dive into details because some of the authors of the

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handbook and of the chapter are with us in the room, and I guess they will share the details of their work during the roundtables. What I can say, at this stage, is that the chapter, based on an in-depth study of the structure and function of scholarly book publishing in two different countries, e.g. Norway and Spain, show perfectly well the diversity of situations, practices, editorial forms, functions that cover the simple word "book". Reading it, I suddenly understood the reason why the scholarly book has such longevity, even in such a rapidly changing context as is science and knowledge production. What appears very clearly from the presentation of cases in this chapter is that precisely, thanks to its size, breadth, ambition, thanks also to the amount of work and dedication it requires from its author, the book is a multipurpose object that has the capacity to address several audiences and several aims at the same time; such as to enable its author to "think through it" as Crossick puts it, to convey original research to the peers of the author, but also to connect research with society and bring the best of the scientific knowledge to the public. Please note that I said that the book "has the capacity" to reach that level. Of course, the promise is not fulfilled each time. But at least it explains why it is so difficult to standardise the evaluation practices around the book: because, considering its peculiar nature, the book is, by definition, a non-standardized object.

I would like to conclude my presentation with a perspective for the future. I come from a community, the community of digital humanities scholars and practitioners, that has a complex relationship with the book; many times, I found myself caught in the middle of a crossfire

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between those who feared that books would be replaced by databases in the brave new digital world, and those who wanted to get rid of it and were exasperated by the injunction coming for the committees in their disciplines to “publish a book” in the most traditional possible way, whereas their heart and soul is completely devoted to developing computational, multimedia or web-based research. This explains also sometimes this strange situation that we find in Digital Humanities, of research projects extremely computational, pushing the envelope of creativity in the usage of digital tools and methods and everything ending into a few hundreds of sheets of paper enclosed into two rigid cover boards. Personally, I consider that it is precisely the added value of the digital humanities to offer the possibility to work with this contradiction, to hold the two terms of the issue and to find creative articulations, cooperations, combinations, and hybrids that would bring the best of the two worlds together. Bringing the best of the two worlds together is not putting them alongside each other. It is designing and creating new forms for the scholarly book, adapting it to the new cognitive environment and enabling it to capture, at best, the way research is done today in the humanities and social sciences.

In this respect, there is a challenge ahead of us. In the context of the OPERAS-P project, several colleagues from Dariah, the SIB and IBL-PAN conducted thorough research under the lead of Maciej Maryl and Marta Blaszcynska about the double question of evaluating the new digital objects that contemporary research in the humanities produces and finding a place for those objects in the current research evaluation practices. Currently, the situation is far from being satisfying. Building upon an extensive literature review, more than 40 interviews and 56 case studies, their report about "The Future of Scholarly Writing" [^4] identified the bottlenecks making it slower and more difficult for research communities in the humanities to transition towards novel forms of communication taking advantage of the digital tools and the online environment. One important aspect is the conservatism of the evaluation practices in many disciplines of the humanities, the lack of skills to conduct proper quality assessment and the lack of rewards attached to these new types of objects. Another study conducted by Erzsebet Toth-Czifra and Marta Blaszynska in the same project, "the quality Assessment of SSH research: innovations and challenges," identified the prestige economy and structures of power in the academic field as major breaks preventing the adoption of more innovative, more transparent, more efficient and more responsible ways of assessing research quality in the humanities. Reinventing the scholarly book in the digital age and in the context of open science is, in my opinion, a *passage obligé* towards the objective of adapting the evaluation practices in the SSH to the needs of their current situation and of the new generations of researchers who bring with them new research practices in these disciplines.

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