

[Navigating the Changing Landscape of Scholarly Book Publishing in Literary and Cultural Studies](#)

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A post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

This post was developed from a virtual panel conversation that took place at the Modern Language Association 2022 meeting in January, organized by the [MLA Publications Committee](#). Over the next week, the Elephant will publish one post per day from each of the six interlocutors on the themes of Change, Generations, Experiments, Open, Fit, and Labor. As always, readers are invited to continue the conversation in the comments. -Eds.

Change

Jennifer Crewe, associate provost and director, Columbia University Press

As long as I have been in scholarly publishing—and that’s a long time—one thing has always been true: change is constant. Here are just some of the changes in the marketplace over the past couple of decades:

- Ever-reducing library funds for individual monographs. This has actually been a slow, gradual erosion as research libraries have moved funds away from purchasing low-use monographs and toward subscription ebook platforms, as well as participating in consortia to provide monographs to their clients;
- The introduction of the Kindle (15 years ago) and the subsequent meteoric rise of ebook sales, which, after reaching a plateau, briefly rose again during the 2020-2021 pandemic lockdown and have now settled in at about 20% of the scholarly book market overall, at least for Columbia;
- The exponential growth in audio books—sales are increasing by 25% each year (see the Elephant’s [post on audio books](#)). I should say here that so far audio books are aimed at general interest readers rather than the scholarly market, but recent AI technology, with amazingly realistic voices, cuts the recording costs way down and may pave the way for more scholarship to be read this way;
- Reduced attention spans for serious books, the result of social media and other competition for “eyeballs”;

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- The rise of Amazon as the dominant bookseller (it now constitutes about 50% of our sales at Columbia) and the subsequent closing of independent stores; and
- Recent enormous changes in the printing and paper industries.

These changes and others like them have always generated cries about a new intractable crisis in the industry. People regularly predict that books will die. But change has also always sparked innovation, publishers have always risen to whatever new challenge they face, and readers keep reading our books.

Recently, the pace of change has been nothing short of amazing. The pandemic caused major turmoil when bookstores closed abruptly and canceled all new orders with publishers in the spring of 2020. We had to pivot on a dime to re-think our usual methods of promoting our books—we took resources out of print advertising and print catalogs and put them into social media and online catalogs for reviewers and booksellers to peruse. We had to forego conference exhibits and reach readers in other ways. We discovered, as did many workers in many industries, that we could be just as productive, if not more productive, working from home (see the Elephant's [post on remote work](#)), and we know we will take certain cost savings that were forced upon us and make them permanent.

Then, just as book sales had more than recovered and we thought we had entered a “new normal,” we began to experience supply chain problems: trucking delays and labor shortages and also a paper shortage (corrugated cardboard turns out to be much more lucrative than book paper), on top of printer consolidation and resulting labor shortages, all contributing to doubling and even tripling the amount of time it takes to get a book printed. This problem is likely to continue throughout 2022 and into 2023. While we can't do much about the paper shortage, ebooks and digital printing have begun to fill the shortfalls, and this may push the percentage of ebook sales up permanently. This is not a bad thing, though it doesn't save publishers money, because even though we save on the paper, printing, binding, and warehousing of the book, we pay a much higher royalty on ebook sales.

So all this is to say, be aware that your publisher is dealing with many exogenous forces, and getting your book printed in time for a certain event may not be possible. But your editor will try, and your editor will be your advocate throughout the process. And know that it is just as much in the interest of the publisher to get the book out as soon as possible as it is in the author's interest.

It's also helpful to be aware that even without these exogenous forces university presses are almost always working on a tight budget. We try to publish as many books as we can, work with the author to make a big impact and share their important ideas far and wide, but we do need your help to do this effectively. Authors play an important role in promoting their books (see our post on [what authors can do](#)); this should be a joint effort. You can help by letting your editor know if you have access to any research funds that can help offset the costs of publication, or if you know of any organizations that may offer funds earmarked for scholarly publications in your field. Most humanities editors and their presses are actively fundraising, as scholarly books generally do not earn back their costs through sales. But we publish them, even without extra funding, because that is what we were put on this earth to do. The reputation of a university press is established by the

important books we publish—and those books are written by you. So we want to partner with you to make your book the best it can be, and to make sure word gets out that it is available, and that it has joined the wider intellectual conversation.

Jennifer Crewe is Associate Provost and Director, Columbia University Press, where she served as Editorial Director and acquired books in literary studies for a number of years. She is a past president of the Association of University Presses and served on the Executive Council of the MLA.

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