

Swedish Publications in a Global World

By Jenny Björkman

Abstract

This paper is about the problems of publishing in a global academic world. The Swedish monograph is slowly in decline in Sweden. The international peer-reviewed article is taking its place.

Yet just as the monograph has had problems, this newer trend has multiple new quandaries. Instead of being read by a larger international audience, some articles tend to stay unread when neither the national nor the international public can find the results. Social scientists and humanities lack a specific venue or scene where results can be discussed by both experts and the public, such as *Science* or *Nature*. This is a problem since the public miss out on important, often tax-funded, knowledge, but also because academics miss out on having an audience and the impact that comes from meeting with the public.

Secondly many journals are so specialised that they influence not only the public's understanding of research and their view on research but also the research and the researchers. Furthermore academics lack both the time to read all relevant articles and to write longer and more complex works, which would be beneficial to both the public and scholars as well. Therefore the race to get published, i.e. achieve excellence and have more impact, tends to affect the research. Researcher may even choose their subjects and how they write about them in order to get published rather than focusing on interesting questions.

Naturally possible solutions have been discussed, such as open access books and more stringent demands on the impact of the research and relevance to the public. However there are still no absolute answers.

Keywords: Peer review, publishing, internationalisation, impact, excellence.

The decline of the monography

There was a time when Swedish scholars in both humanities and social sciences reported their research in monographs. Theses and other studies used to appear in books – monographs – and were issued either in the universities’ own series or even by commercial publishers. Here, discursive accounts of the research findings, often in Swedish, were allowed. To disseminate the findings and internationalise the research and reach non-Swedish speakers who might be interested, there was the briefest of abstracts in English.

Although more books are published today than ever, the academic monograph has lost ground in Sweden. According to the (as yet incomplete) Swedish database over Swedish research literature, SwePUB, of the 636 books published in 2012 half were monographs.

Above all, however, the qualification value of monographs has declined. This is evident at Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ) from the past few years’ applications for printing grants (or ‘production grants’ as they are now called) from researchers already in receipt of RJ grants. In principle, after the experts’ assessment and the authors’ revisions, if any, RJ approves all such applications. Although the rules remain unchanged, the number of applications and, accordingly, printing grants awarded have fallen since 2000, and since 2009 the decline appears to be a constant at roughly half of what it used to be.

Quite simply, there is less pressure to write monographs because they (as well as the anthologies and the essays they contain) are no longer seen as valuable as before, especially since the time allowed to write them is short and it takes time to write a monography. This is not only a Swedish development. (Lambert 2015) The timeliness here is crucial. Many final reports received by RJ (every project financed by RJ has to write a final report where the main results and publications are listed) show how researchers, despite their initially high ambitions to write monographs summarising project results and explaining arguments in depth, cannot manage it during the project period (normally three years). This is a growing trend. Researchers now focus on articles instead, preferably for journals that are international and peer-reviewed, with a high rank in one of the many rankings of such journals that exist today.

Thus, while the aim of a project always used to be a monograph, these days it is three to five articles published in high-ranking journals. The requirement that researchers should, right from the start, think through their own ‘publication strategy’ accelerates this trend since articles, after all, are faster to write and hopefully get published more promptly – and finally reach a more international audience. This internationalisation is a goal not only for RJ but also for politicians and university

administrators and decision-makers. Articles seems to be a safer strategy than the more risky project of writing one monograph, even if it is in English.

Therefore the monograph is abandoned, perhaps in a bottom drawer. Perhaps it will be printed one day. Yet the danger is, of course, that in-depth analyses are delayed or never appear at all because of the demand to which many researchers feel they are subject: publish or perish.

The internationalisation that writing articles represents is good, as is the increasingly rapid rate at which they often appear — good both for the individual researchers' qualifications and for making the research more international. Internationalisation in the form of a brief, meagre abstract was far too limited and, in any case, so many internationally interesting research projects are under way in Sweden that the results should also be disseminated outside the Swedish-speaking region. Swedish researchers are getting better at presenting their results in a global world and thinking of their research as part of an international field, which is also good. An example of the latter is that almost every recent application for RJ's Research initiation award — where researchers apply for conferences, seminars and workshops, and create new researcher networks — are international and there is a lot of collaboration between Swedish scholars and international colleges.

It must be said that many of the often thick tomes that used to be written seldom had a substantial numbers of readers. According to a popular saying only the mentor, professor, examination board and dissertation opponent reads the thesis, and even though that is not true, statistics from Svenska förläggareföreningen (the Swedish Association for Publishers) tell us that only about 1000 copies of books classified as "kvalificerad facklitteratur" (qualified non-fiction) were sold 2012 and 2013 and almost 3000 ex belonging to the category "humaniora" (including dictionaries and citation books) were sold (Wiberg 2014: 18, 54).

Ideally articles put a premium on what is clear-cut and concise, even though everyone knows this is not always the case (Östlund 2015). Additionally, articles are scrutinised in what are often very detailed processes of peer reviews. These processes have now become the hub of much academic assessment — both for funding applications (i.e. advance peer review before the study) and for article reviews (after the study, since that is what is assessed). Obviously monographs have also been peer reviewed, such as for a university press series, but these publishers have only recently begun to work in Sweden.

Despite these positive aspects of the new publishing landscape, this trend has some problems. I will discuss some of these problems in this article, such as: the lack of a scene or venue; specialisation; and timeliness. In my conclusion I will try to discuss some possible solutions.

The lack of a scene

At best, monographs in Swedish reached a broader Swedish public. Articles in English (or German or French) may be rendered useless, i.e. they will not be read at all since neither the English-speaking audience nor the Swedish will actually read the articles.

Non-fiction books in Swedish, i.e. the academic monographs as well as books from well-known publishers, were once reviewed in the major specialist journals and sometimes even in the general daily press, bringing about a shared discussion of the research, at least for humanities and social sciences researchers. Many of the older Swedish academic journals served an important role in unifying the researchers and consolidating the field; through these journals one could get a good overview of the field, since this was where debates took place, PhD-defences were assessed and major works in that specific field were reviewed. However, those days are now past.

Presently, with research fragmented in articles from all over the world – or the internet – there is a risk that public debate on research, if not disappearing altogether, could possibly become more elusive. This is because the articles are so numerous and yet also harder to find, despite open access, partly owing to the lack of major, shared journals for the humanities and the social sciences that everyone reads, or at least is required to read.

For scientists, there are journals like *Science* and *Nature* — the kind that are lacking for social sciences and humanities. This absence threatens to erode academic discussion both across disciplinary boundaries and with the public, especially since coverage of non-fiction books in the daily press in Sweden has shrunk in the past decade and in many cases has vanished altogether (for ex. Holmberg 2010, Grahn 2015). By extension, this is causing problems with providing the Swedish public with new knowledge.

Monographs in past times contributed, at best, to academic discussion *both* in the specialist press and outside academia. Books were reviewed and discussed. However articles from various highly reputed international peer-review publications nowadays seldom reach researchers outside the inner circle, and only in exceptional cases do the results published by humanities and social sciences researchers in international peer-review journals actually reach the daily press.

It may not be feasible to reverse this trend. Yet syntheses, studies of both breadth and depth, and discussions across subject boundaries and between disciplines are still needed, maybe more than ever, as is public discussion about research, national and international alike.

The acceleration of specialisation

As far as the accelerated degree of specialisation is concerned, the problems are more numerous and perhaps also more severe. Just as for scientists, what is published in journals for humanities and social sciences researchers is highly specialised. This is unavoidable, and with more researchers and subject areas, specialities have proliferated. According to the Swedish Higher Education Authority, the number of researchers with PhDs has risen markedly in the past few years and this rise is continuing. A foundation such as Riksbankens Jubileumsfond is of course influenced by this. In the beginning of the 1980s 20-30% of all applications were granted, from 2010 and onward between 5-10% were granted (Samuelsson 2014: 14).

This means that there are more authors who want to, and should, be published in the existing journals. In the globalised research community that is beginning to emerge, the number of scholars who want to be published in the journals will also become more numerous. There are, quite simply, an enormous number of researchers whose work is published on a large scale.

Thus, the increase in specialities is hardly surprising. It is a matter of being able to find and see what one is interested in, as well as getting a chance to reach out and be published, as the great majority of researchers want.

The classification of journals is not merely about whether they cover art history or political science. The historical journals serve as an example. In the international journals, besides every conceivable geographic and chronological speciality, there are also special journals for social history, urban history as well as the history of individual towns and cities, family history, historical demography, economic history, environmental history, historiography, history of science and medicine, different kinds of ethnic history and, of course, numerous journals focusing on women's history.

Moreover, this is far from being a complete list since historians also write in journals about completely different subjects. No one can read all journals, but it is hard work just to read the ones that you should in order to keep up with your field, let alone other fields that could be of interest. According to Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren, who has interviewed scholars in different disciplines about their academic work, scholars tend to read not the full articles but only the abstracts (Löfgren 2015).

Early in 2013, the problems caused by this type of specialisation were noted by the cancer researcher David Rubenson (Stanford Cancer Institute) in *The Scientist* (Rubenson 2013). Rubenson refers to a crisis not only in popular dissemination but of scientific communication, and in his view extreme specialisation is in danger of bringing about formerly unknown difficulties in this communication. According to Rubenson, we even risk creating a communication crisis for science in which the growing number of specialisations and the proliferation of researchers that has

taken place at the same time entail a risk of ever more knowledge becoming unintelligible to almost everyone in the field concerned, except for a very few initiates.

What he is referring to is not the fact that the public miss out on research findings and new knowledge, but that there is a danger of researchers failing to understand one another. In Rubenson's view, this risks hampering rather than enabling research across subject boundaries and between different subjects. To make interdisciplinary research possible, researchers must be able to talk to and understand one another. According to Rubenson, researchers seldom do this nowadays, owing to the rigid specialisation resulting from, for example, the new publication patterns.

Marc Kirschner has pointed towards a similar problem in biomedical science where the increasing tendency is to equate significance to any medical relevance. Scholars and journals fail to see and acknowledge what could be new and important questions if they are seen as being too speculative or even considered to be low-impact. The need to highlight high-impact science makes science too narrow, especially since one wants to promote what can actually be achieved, what he calls feasible goals (Kirschner 2013). This topic was also discussed by Bruce Alberts at a seminar held by the Swedish Young Academy, (video here: <http://www.sverigesungakademi.se/665.html>).

A Finnish professor of political science has witnessed to the same phenomenon. Göran Djupsund admits that his younger colleagues are superb in their own areas, but he thinks they lack basic knowledge of everyday politics and how it works. The specialisation directs the researchers away from their own countries and their local problems. The researchers simply lacked the time to ponder these matters when they were intensively engaged in becoming specialists in order to obtain qualifications. To be excellent is to reach success in terms of international publications, writes Djupsund. This is good, but in Djupsund's view it contains a latent and unintended mechanism that has adverse effects in the long-term, which is the ever-accelerating specialisation of research. This is not good. In order to get published the researchers and the researcher groups have become very narrow, and possess extremely advanced expertise in a very limited field (Djupsund 2015: 61-66).

Although most stakeholders (from politicians to researchers) would like to see generalists and researchers with broader knowledge, who are interdisciplinary in some sense, the danger is that what we will get are extreme specialists or even blinkered nerds. According to Göran Djupsund, local knowledge (knowledge that might be of interest to the citizens, the local politicians and public administrators) may be at risk. This also tends to limit the public's interest in research and science, since this kind of research does not concern them, or so they think. When RJ talks to Swedish researchers in political science they also discuss this problem.

To RJ relevance and out-reach is important, however in an evaluation of environmental social science in Sweden it was shown that this is not something that can easily be gained through requirements or demands in the applications. Although RJ

did not demand societal relevance in our projects, evaluations have shown that projects funded by RJ (only 4) had more relevance than others (*Mobilising Swedish Social Science Research on Sustainability*, 2010). There are other ways to encourage scholars to reach out and to be relevant other than demands of societal use (*nytta*) in the applications.

The lack of time and demand to perform on a yearly basis

Syntheses and broad overviews are one way that scholars can reach out and remove themselves from the trap of specialisation. There has also been a call for syntheses and broad overviews in humanities and social sciences. However, few people have time to carry out the big, in-depth syntheses and wide-ranging overviews at present. Modern-day economics of publishing calls for peer reviewed articles in internationally recognised journals, and scholars think they are supposed to “deliver” or “produce” one article a year. (Even these expressions bare witness to a way of thinking about the academy and scholar activities). These articles, well-composed in many respects, serve as tasty morsels: there is an abundance of everything, but it is only digestible in small mouthfuls, and this may be a problem for the scholarly pursuit of knowledge itself. Compare this to Lövgren’s testimony on scholars who read more abstracts than articles.

The race to get published yearly and to be excellent has actually changed academic life according to two researchers in business administration, Nick Butler and Sverre Spoelstra. According to them, decisions about what to research and where to publish the results are increasingly being made according to diktats of journal rankings and managing editors of premier outlets. In the field of their research, critical management studies, this is a threat to what used to be key elements of the academic life (Butler & Spoelstra 2014). Butler and Spoelstra have also seen that this game of excellence tends to master its players, instead of the other way around (Butler & Spoelstra 2012; Butler & Spoelstra 2015).

Bruce Alberts, former editor-in-chief at *Science*, has argued in a similar fashion at a seminar called Publish or Perish. He meant that the impact race also led to strange priorities in the journals. Cancer research was more often considered high impact, and he had seen examples of articles that did not get published since they were supposedly low impact. This in turn had an influence on what young scholars tended to do their research on (<http://www.sverigesungaakademi.se/665.html>).

Perhaps the Swedish researchers’ lack of time and/or weak incentive to write syntheses in fact impedes their international careers. Researchers, owing to the pressure to get published at regular intervals, no longer have the time to write more extensively and they do not manage to implement factual comparisons, or synthe-

sising and more discursive in-depth writings. This could possibly make the particularities of Swedish research more interesting internationally (see for example Kirschner 2013).

The lack of time and peer reviews

The pressure on academic journals, where more and more academics are supposed to be assessed as fast as possible, also puts pressure on reviewers and editors. The question becomes whether the academic culture of publishing is broken. (Whithouse 2015) This idea has led to a series of studies in recent years which have questioned the system of peer reviewing. In 2013 this was discussed in *PLoS Biology* when two researchers (the biologists Adam Eyre-Walker and Nina Stoletzki) investigated a number of articles and examined the peer-review process they had undergone. They looked at 6,000 published articles from two databases and were able to show that the same articles often received different assessments. As the Uppsala University historian Rolf Torstendahl stated that there is no congruence between minimum requirements and optimum norms, and this is naturally a problem although perhaps not news to many humanities and social sciences researchers (Torstendahl 1988:72). Most of the assessments were also subjective, as Eyre-Walker and Stoletzki wrote (Eyre-Walker & Stoletzki 2013). This sentiment has often been repeated, but the authors also addressed questions on how we should evaluate science and research in the future. The problems of peer reviewing, especially in open access journals, have also been addressed by John Bohannon (Bohannon 2013; see also D. Butler 2013 or Kendall 2015 who address the problem with publishing consultants).

For anyone who has been personally engaged in peer review and assessment, the difficulty in finding reviewers also arises. For researchers, the problem is not only the time they spend on reviewing their colleagues' work as peers, but also the time it takes to get their own work reviewed. This issue has been studied by Liv Langfeldt and Svein Kyvik. In their research they estimated that the time a professor dedicated to review tasks is about one month per year which is quite a lot, especially since administrators as well as the academics themselves want to devote their time to other things as well. The time spent on evaluations implies less time for research, and with peer reviews increasing, the time for research tends to decrease. Langfeldt and Kyvik also noted that the highest ranking academics handle the most prestigious and power-performing evaluation-tasks, leaving the less prestigious and less power-performing to lower ranking and more junior researchers. Additionally evaluation does not just mean evaluating journals. Scholars also evaluate as examiners, staff selectors, grant distributors, editors, referees, prize awarders and evaluators for research organisations, policy advisors and such (Langfeldt & Kyvik 2011: 199-212).

The time-consuming peer review processes today are faced with competition from bibliometrics as a way to do things faster. Metrics seems to be a way to get away with assessing research without reading, thus making the process faster. However assessing research without reading is not a very wise way to do things, and there has been a lot of criticism against the use of metrics in academia (See for example Smith 2013, Kirschner 2013, Anderson 2013).

What can be done?

Some solutions have been proposed. Open access led by libraries' efforts to avoid exorbitant costs of academic, and especially scientific, journals may be one. Most funders in Sweden — not least RJ — have rewarded open access. There are several key arguments for open access. The importance of openness and access, including the added value of increasing the dissemination of research – not at least in the world outside of Europe and where ordinary books really are expensive – is often mentioned.

Open access not only makes high class research available to researcher and students but also to a general public. For scholars this increased reach means a possibility to get more impact and more citations. Peter Suber has called this 'the access revolution to reach more readers' (Suber 2012).

There are, of course difficulties with open access, as Bohannon pointed out. In a Swedish context Katarina Bernhardsson among others have pointed to a counterargument which discusses the risk of information overload. Accessibility is not enough – because how can we ensure that mass online publications get found and read? Therefore we shall return to the problem with which we opened this paper.

Bernhardsson argues that the answer is in the context, by which she means an inclusion in a selection and editing procedure (more peer reviewing of course). The risk today is that publishers are disappearing, and their jobs are disappearing with them (Bernhardsson 2015: 156-157). However publishers – in one way or another – as well as librarians are crucial if we want research to reach a broader audience and have more of an impact.

For some time, there has also been plans to make the open access publication of monographs possible. This cannot, of course, solve the problem of researchers' time shortage, but it may possibly help monographs become revalued, which is no small feat. This could possibly encourage scholars to write monographs as well as articles. The idea is that research funded with tax revenues should be made available with open access. All books published should undergo a peer review. This idea is of course nothing new, but having it become a requirement may make it easier to assign value to monographs and place them on the same level as articles.

In Sweden a national consortium has been set up to organise special processes for books published with open access, as well as helping guide people through the

open access jungle. This consortium is called Kriterium. To obtain the Kriterium stamp of approval, all publications will undergo a stringent peer review process following the new guidelines. The books will be available in print as well as in open access. A goal for Kriterium is to strengthen the book as a way of academic publishing (More on the goals here: <http://www.kriterium.se/site/about/>).

Just as many journals and publishing houses have begun to charge for publication (so that the costs, rather than being incurred by journals or publishers, are transferred to researchers themselves), so the public inquiry on the matter has recommended a charge for a peer-review process (The sum of 10,000 Swedish kronor has been mooted, but the funders are expected to pay it and treat anything in excess of this as costs that should be funded by a consortia and regarded as a national infrastructure for research). On the other hand, publishing houses according to the Consortium should not charge for open access publication since they, so to speak, get peer reviews of manuscripts free-of-cost (see *A National Consortium for Open Academic Books in Sweden* 2013).

Today there are new models of book-processing charges (BPS) in the English-speaking world. The idea is that you pay to be published – a rather unusual thought in many countries. As Katarina Bernhardsson points out this has long been the case in Sweden. We already have a tradition of printing or producing grants. One reason for this is that our language region is too small to enable academic books to be sold in large editions and generate profits for publishers (Bernhardsson 2015: 158-159).

However maybe we should start considering other new solutions in this digital era. Scholars can meet both the public and other scholars on websites such as the Conversation, where all material is open access. Such venues can be international as well as national or both.

There are ongoing discussions in Sweden on another kind of platforms where academic journals can meet and cooperate, such as www.cairn.info. This is one way of helping both scholars and the public to get access to an enormous amount of articles as well as getting those small but sometimes essential academic journals funded. As was pointed out by Elliott Shore, there is an increasing need for humanities to take a greater part in the ongoing conversation on the internet. This must not only be done through the monograph (See ARL Fall Forum 2014). Funders such as Riksbankens Jubileumsfond must also pay more attention to both funding research and learning how this research can reach an audience, i.e. how it is published.

And in the future scholars will of course still be read, but not necessary only in books. According to Sarah Thomas, Vice President for Harvard Library, we are still in the early stages of sorting out how we can communicate academic development more effectively. Her colleague Robert Darnton does not fear the disappearance of the physical book. Instead he sees the printed and online versions as allies. According to Sarah Thomas, the uniqueness of the online book is that it is not static or

bound between covers. It can be changed over time, and other authors can contribute. In the future perhaps scholars will publish digital projects instead of books, as has already been suggested (Lambert 2015).

The question remains as to how publication patterns should be shaped to satisfy both researchers' demands for internationalisation, qualifications and peers reviews, as well as the research requirements of an arena in which results and questions are allowed to be discussed more generally. How can we avoid too many narrow specialisations while still promoting in-depth analyses and internationalisation? Additionally how do we stop the quest for publication merits which threaten academic core values?

These are the challenges for the future of publication patterns for researchers in social sciences and humanities where the funding bodies such as Riksbankens Jubileumsfond should take part.

Jenny Björkman has a PhD in History and is a Communication Manager at Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ), the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences. As well as funding research, RJ seeks to influence research policy in various ways. Björkman has edited their annual year book since 2010. Last year in 2015 the book focused on research and research funding, and the title is 'Thinking Ahead: Research, Funding and the Future'. Jenny.bjorkman@rj.se

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