

## **Publishing on Demand: Who Will be the Gatekeepers?**

*by  
Paul Rich\**

The pace of change in academia being wrought by the computer revolution shows no sign of slowing. In fact, it is accelerating. There is now an explosion in publishing on-line and the growth of the publishing on demand industry is bound to have an impact on foreign relations research and writing. Possibly my own experience with universe, one of the largest World Wide Web publishers, may be useful in assessing where the new technology is taking scholarship.

Publishing on demand is a recent phenomenon, and most of the companies were started in 1999 or 2000. Some of the biggest include Xlibris, ipublisher, indypublish, and upublish. These concerns have all quickly forged connections with other companies; universe is 49 per cent owned by Barnes & Noble and Xlibris is in effect a Random House subsidiary. The competition is fierce and resembles the competition of Yahoo, AltaVista, and Google to be the prime search engine. At least for the moment, authors are being courted - which for most of us is an unusual experience.

These on-line companies are accepting newly written manuscripts, but they have a special interest in republishing books which are out-of-print. In the case of universe, it has acquired backlist titles from both Harvard University and Columbia University Presses and is working with special groups like the Harlem Writers. Books that Harvard published years ago, such as Trotsky's notebooks, and which have long been unobtainable except from antiquarian booksellers, are now back in print.

When a book goes out of print, it is not just the possibility of its being used in a course or placed on a reading list that is diminished. Most of us are good customers for our own books and end up giving copies, albeit parsimoniously, to students and friends, as long as the supply lasts and we can afford it. In an informal survey of colleagues, I find a surprising number who have one copy left of a book they wrote, or even, to their embarrassment, no copy at all. As far as I am concerned, the opportunity to put out of print titles back into print is a gift from heaven.

Most of us who have published know the frustration of trying to secure a second edition when a book does go out of print. The rights are under most contracts supposed to revert to the author but sometimes presses are very dilatory in deciding, which they usually finally do, that they will not reprint. When the rights return to the author, the chances of finding another publisher are limited. There may be a slight demand for the book but not enough to justify reprinting.

With the new on-line companies, nothing ever goes out of print. There is no expensive inventory of printed books to warehouse, although in some cases a number of copies are printed and shipped to retail bookstores when the publisher thinks impulse sales could be a factor. The book is ordered after viewing it on-line; universe for example claims that placing the entire book on-line does not effect sales, although the choice of having the book on-line for viewing is left up to the author. The universe logic is that if the cost of the book is kept low, people will be willing to buy it rather than try to read it on the web. Prices seem to be between ten and twenty-five dollars, which means that printing the book from the web site is not as cheap as buying the book. Moreover, I think that many of us do not mind if a colleague or student in Africa or Latin America who cannot afford the price is able to read the book in a library computer.

Letting people read the book on the web seems to be a fairly universal policy for these new publishers; most of the on-line publishers are evangelical about putting books on-line as a sales device and keeping the

prices for the paper book low. Once one accepts this idea of having the book available free in a web form as well as on paper, another fear that springs to mind is that the printed book will be cheap looking. Before seeing about second editions for some of my own books I checked out the quality of the paper books by ordering several and was surprised at how good the printing and the binding were. Moreover, the service by mail is excellent. The new publishers have electronic bookstores but the books can also be ordered through Amazon and other electronic booksellers as well as through local "real" bookstores.

The marketing plan for universe is to have an order desk along with computers for previewing books and the machine to manufacture the books in every Barnes & Noble outlet as well as every Kinko's, and one thinks that if that materializes that the other on-line publishers will also be working out bookstore arrangements. The Barnes & Noble idea is that the customer chooses books, goes off to browse or have a coffee, and picks up the newly printed books in twenty minutes or so. These book making machines have rapidly evolved and they do an amazing job on binding and covers. It is easy to imagine that they will be ubiquitous in a decade, present in all college bookstores as well as small town libraries and even the local drugstore.

I decided to take the plunge and offered universe seven of my books and of editions I had edited: *The Invasions of the Gulf*, *Arab War Lords*, *Iraq and Imperialism*, *A Voyage in the Gulf*, *Wartime in Baghdad*, *A Soldier in Kurdistan*, and *Stanford Patriarchs*. The contract terms are generous, as the author is only tied to the publisher for a couple years. I opted for new cover designs and fretted about errors that I wanted to correct in the new editions. Editing takes place via the web. The proofs are posted at a site which the author gets the code to obtain, and the changes are put on a form obtained via the web. There is, happily, a human being connected with all this, and the editor I was assigned was very congenial. The seven books are now all in print in their second editions, forever.

The procedure with completely new books is similar although there has to be attention to the word processor used and the quality and copyright of proposed illustrations. A glance at the new titles being offered from the on-line publishers shows that American foreign relations is already one of the favorite subjects. Sales seem at least as good as with conventionally published titles. At least one universe title has made *The New York Times* bestseller list. An obvious advantage is that anyone in the world with web access can take a look at the book.

I have been unable to come up with a downside to all of this for those of us who want to get our now out of print books back into print. Being able to correct errors is a great luxury. Most of us who have had books published would welcome the chance to change at least some mistakes. In the case of *The Invasions of the Gulf* I had been haunted by a typographical error that created two individuals who were apparently British Political Agents in the Gulf when there was only one, Messrs. Arthur and Arnold Galloway. There is now only one and the imaginary Arthur has gone away and will not appear in my nightmares anymore.

A negative aspect to these developments is that this is an industry in a rush. These companies are extremely anxious to expand their lists and not anxious to spend time on editing. So if one is used to a lot of editing, it takes some adjustment. There is editing, but all the schemes offered make it as minimal as possible. A book needing heavy editing is not for publishing on demand. If you have a book that needs a minimum of editing, these are not vanity presses and they will print the book and pay you royalties. When you start asking for editing, the enthusiasm dims.

Another caveat is that universities are conservative and I am not sure I would recommend this route for anyone looking for tenure. This is perhaps not something for a newly minted PhD who plans to impress a committee, unless of course he or she has already published and gone out of print. Whenever on-line publishing is mentioned, the question of who is going to be the gatekeeper arises, which is legitimate. But I am on the boards of some journals and presses, and frankly the finances of academic publishing have been

getting more and more precarious. So it is not clear that there will be gatekeepers of the old stamp even if conventional publishing survives this electronic onslaught.

The on-line publishers claim that in the next five years the demand for books on disk which can be inserted in handhelds and palm readers and, most importantly, the book readers which are now being sold commercially, - along with the demand for collections of books on cds, will make paper publishing alone obsolete. In other words conventional publishers that survive will be forced to become electronic publishers because the demand will be for electronic texts.

Conventional paper publishing, they argue, is much less desirable than publishing with an on-line company that can provide all the different versions that will be demanded. That may be true for fiction, but whether or not scholarly books will be needed in those versions is still open to debate. It is clear that bundling a number of new books on a single historical topic, such as Cuban-American relations, would make sense for a library cd. Possibly some academics will find taking disks or cds on a sabbatical or trip and using a handheld reader will be useful. But I for one would prefer when I am not in a plane or on a beach to have the paper version.

Another virtue being claimed for the on- line publishers is that library catalogs are inadequate and much good research material simply goes unnoticed. For example, a book on American relationships with Canada that includes references to the French island of Miquelon will be found by a web search if the book is on- line but the Miquelon references might not be enough to have caused their mention in regular cataloging.

Much more could be said about all this, but I believe the debate in the next few years is going to focus on gatekeeping. Why not let the reader be the gatekeeper, say the proponents. Faced by the spiraling cost of books and journals, and the fact that many good books don't get published because of continuing budget crises, we may have to rethink our views on publishing. After all, many libraries are finding that transferring part of the onus for depth in collections to on-line services is an attractive alternative. We know very little about who makes the decisions of these on-line services to use various journals and articles. We just accept that the library has added another computer service.

What I do know is that when a book has already run the gauntlet of the gatekeepers and is simply out of print because of the increasingly commercial attitude of publishers, the publishing on demand industry is a new lease on life, and can only be good for research. As for new work, scholars who are impatient about editorial decisions and discouraged by the economics of publishing will find these services immensely attractive. When the changes in the last few years that the Internet and World Wide Web have brought to the study and teaching of American foreign relations are considered, it would be foolish to believe that we have seen even the end of the beginning of this revolution.

**About the author:** Paul Rich is Fellow of The Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford University, and Professor of International Relations and History at The University of the Americas-Puebla, Mexico. He is President Elect of the American Policy Studies Organization and endowment chair of The American and Popular Culture Associations.