

# Planned obsolescence: Publishing, technology and the future of the academy

By Kristina Oldenburg.

*Kathleen Fitzpatrick was October's speaker for the BC Research Libraries Group [lecture series](#). She is the Director of Scholarly Communication at the Modern Language Association. Fitzpatrick's talk was "Planned obsolescence: Publishing, technology and the future of the academy." Her publications include a book of the same title (2011) and *The anxiety of obsolescence: The American novel in the age of television* (2006). She drew on her experiences publishing her own books to argue that scholarly publications models must change. Highlights of her talk are summarized below.*

## "They were planning on making money on your book?" — Mom

About a decade ago, an academic press declined Kathleen Fitzpatrick's manuscript. The marketing department did not think it could sell the book; this concern eclipsed the favourable opinions of two reviewers. Fitzpatrick's mother was surprised at the reason for rejection. She could not believe anyone had even wanted to try making money by publishing a monograph on the death of the novel. Another publisher eventually picked up the book, but the experience helped prompt Fitzpatrick's examination of the scholarly publishing process.

A central theme of Fitzpatrick's talk was that the university press is insupportable in its current form. Initially founded to publish academics' writing, these presses were later commercialized as university administrators cut back on subsidies. Lower sales to libraries, which increasingly rely on interlibrary loan in response to their own budget cuts, compounded the problem. Scholarly monograph sales in the 2000s were a third of what they had been the previous decade.

## The undead university press

Fitzpatrick identified scholarly monograph publishing as "undead." It is "exercising power without really being alive," and "walking the earth... eating the brains of the living." Monographs may be expensive to produce and difficult to market, but they remain

critical for humanities scholars seeking promotion and tenure.

The scholarly monograph is "not being driven out by an alternate form," Fitzpatrick insisted. Although she expressed enthusiasm for electronic formats and asserted that the humanities must move beyond print on paper, she also believes that the print format is still fine, and so is the content. She noted that while electronic publication formats are not free, they do have benefits. The system itself, she insisted, is in crisis.

## Peer review: learning to be helpful

Fitzpatrick identified the peer review process as central to scholarly work, but in need of fixing. She explained that the reasons for peer review are changing. Print is expensive; peer review used to be a necessary gatekeeper because dissemination was so costly. Fitzpatrick argued that positive responses to a work could help raise its visibility.

Fitzpatrick pointed out that peer review can benefit referees, too, but that helpfulness goes against the way scholars [in the humanities] are trained. Peer reviewers need to do "a lot of labour for no credit" under the current system. Making the process more transparent would give them the recognition they deserve, and encourage participation.

She cautioned that transparent peer review "requires careful shepherding," and offered an example from her own career. She posted the manuscript for [Planned obsolescence](#) online for open peer review. Before inviting widespread comment on her online draft, she emailed nine colleagues to ask them to post a comment or two on specific parts of the text; four complied. Two of these people continued reading, and published comments throughout the whole text.

As an author, Fitzpatrick found the open review process incredibly valuable. She said that she could see interactions between reviewers. She could also

view how many reviewers were troubled or excited by different parts of the draft.

The book is available in print, but Fitzpatrick explained that the digital draft remains online, "as a historical record of that process."

### Rethinking the whole thing

A lot needs to change for new methods of scholarly communication to succeed. Fitzpatrick is optimistic, and noted that a number of institutions are "attempting to understand" new models of disseminating research. However, she also noted that scholars, departments, and deans must communicate with each other about the value of scholarly output.

Fitzpatrick cautioned that she needed to do a lot of negotiation with her publisher before she got permission to post a draft online. She stated that publishers could embrace new forms of scholarly communication by shifting their focus to services, versus their current emphasis on selling finished products.

### Roles for libraries

Fitzpatrick said that academic libraries have many roles in emerging methods of scholarly communication. She noted that libraries were traditionally seen as places that "suck in scholarship," rather than help create it, but that they should serve to connect universities to the world. They can do this through publishing and archiving.

Additionally, they can develop and establish platforms. She also noted that libraries help rising scholars develop the technical and critical knowledge to find and create new works.

### More from the BCRLG speaker series

[BC Research Library Group's](#) September lecture was Michael Ridley's "The crisis in academic librarianship." The [webcast of Ridley's talk](#) is now available. Other lectures in this series are [archived online](#).

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