

Publishing on the Periphery: Seeking Transnational Solutions

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I want in this talk to think about interconnections, interconnections between scholars in the developed world and those in less favoured nations, and between scholars in different less developed countries.

This topic is not ignored but most discussions implicitly assume that good work is produced by scholars in the developed world and that we should make if possible for those in the developing world to benefit from the wisdom of their rich cousins. In this paper I want to argue for a more balanced view of the world, and think not just about the flow of information from the center to the periphery, but equally from the periphery to the center and between parts of the periphery. In other words I want to think about a network of equals rather than the current structure of a dominant centre and subordinate periphery.

Three more prefatory remarks are called for.

First, as a university press publisher I think more about the work of humanities and social science scholars than that of hard scientists, and thus the open access movement's presumption that only a small minority of authors lack the funding to pay author fees has little resonance in my world of under-funded disciplines. While perhaps a few countries are, in the sciences, effectively and quickly migrating from the periphery to the center, the divide is still sharp in the humanities and, even in the sciences, most countries are still stuck in the predicament that I will be focusing on.

Second, I work with scholars who do not need sophisticated machinery to do their research and thus the capability imbalance between developed and developing countries is less marked than in the hard sciences. In other words, there are less impediments to third world scholars producing good work than in nuclear physics or micro-biology.

Third, I am a book publisher and thus more interested in the long documents with which we work than with short journal articles. I am not apologizing for these perspectives but feel the need to make them evident from the start.

The dominance of scientists in debates about the reshaping of the scholarly publishing system is unfortunate and has led to proposals that just do not work for book-oriented and under-funded fields, yet the scientists arrogantly plough on, unaware that the world they know and prescribe for is not the whole universe, but just a large galaxy within a more complex and variegated system.

Centre and Periphery

A couple of years ago, at the University of Hong Kong we had a small conference on teaching literature at which scholars came from most of the countries of the crescent from Pakistan to Korea. They came from amongst other countries, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The caliber of the participants was exceptional and their contributions lively, valuable and informed. I say this not to be patronizing, but to report how much we are missing if the works of these people, and of course thousands of their colleagues, is not available outside their countries. The present system in a faulty, partial, slow and inefficient way enables them to participate in the wider scholarly enterprise as readers, but not to contribute as authors. And thus the wider scholarly world is deprived of their contributions, their special perspectives, and is thus the poorer.

This is the issue that I am addressing here. Of course, we can all cite a few scholars who have transcended the barriers. But the fact that a few exceptional people, also blessed with luck, and in most cases relative affluence in their home countries, surmount the obstacles does not deny that there is a problem. And I would challenge you to find individuals who have gained international reputations while staying at home in less favoured nations. I am sure in nearly every case we can think of emigration to the USA or UK has been crucial to that person's success.

This leads into the other major concern about the present system: that what does get into the international and accessible literature from the Periphery has to be filtered and transmuted to make it palatable to readers in the Centre, or to put it more sharply and simplify only a little, to be recognized or to be published by an American press, your work has to be made acceptable to an American audience. There is a subtle or less subtle process of Americanization, or at least contextualization for an American reader. This at least influences the way research is presented but also, as we are especially aware in Hong Kong, strongly influences what research gets done.

To quote from a Taiwanese scholar¹: 'when the international academic publishing industry is increasingly market-oriented towards the 'US' readership (because 'that is where the biggest market is'), it is increasingly difficult to deal with the question of context; for contextualizing can always mean that critical work has to contextualize for *them* (the US readership) the discourse from elsewhere.....works written outside the US are always asked to contextualize when addressing 'local' issues, or even to analyze issues within a language or framework which 'American' academics are familiar with.'

Today, I am only concerned with the need for freeing up the mechanisms by which scholarly writings are disseminated in order to bring equal privilege to those who write from the Periphery as for those who write from the Centre. But there are bigger issues lurking. To quote Professor Chen again: 'This is precisely what I meant earlier by reproducing the existing power structure of global capitalism and the political nation-states. The direction of knowledge flow is contingent upon the volume of power positioned within the nation-state structure.' In other words, the present system sustains the hegemony of American ideas.

Just to make this concrete with one small example, there is no one in the department of economics at Hong Kong University who is seriously working on the economics of Hong Kong. They are all doing theoretical work driven by the research agendas of American universities. Why is this? Because they are assessed by their success in publishing in international, read American, journals and therefore need to do work that has a good probability of acceptance in those journals. Thus the hegemony of American ideas.

I am still in danger of falling into the trap of only thinking radially, or focusing on balancing the flows between the Centre and the Periphery. How would a Vietnamese scholar's work reach a Kenyan? Amazing happenstance aside, the route will be through the Centre and even then the likelihood of the transmission being completed is small, if not vanishingly small. And that is just to think of the physical and economic barriers, but add to that the filtering effect at the Centre and it is clear that even if the text reaches from one scholar to the other, it will be because it is or has been made relevant and understandable to a reader in a highly developed country, not because it speaks to a person in a developing country. A complete solution to the problem I am addressing must enable the flow of work within the Periphery as well as making the radial flows equally privileged.

¹ Chen Kuan-Hsing, Not yet the Post-Colonial Era, *Cultural Studies* 10(1) 1996:37-70.

To summarize the issues, there is a weak and delayed flow from the Centre to the Periphery in finished books, and a small flow of manuscripts from the Periphery to the Centre strained rigorously through a Centre-oriented filter. How can the flow to the Periphery be improved? How can flows within the Periphery be encouraged? And how can unfiltered flows from the Periphery to the Centre be achieved? Indeed how do we break down the metaphor of Centre and Periphery and move to a situation better described as a web of inter-connected and equally privileged, or rather non-privileged, nodes? Or, as it has been put in another way: how do we provincialize Anglo-American work?

Intra- and Inter-Country Challenges

An attack on this problem has two dimensions: the mechanism for the flow of texts between countries and the publishing infra-structure within countries. Even if we can create the conditions for an easy and unprivileged flow of publications between countries and achieve circumferential rather than radial flows, we have achieved little if the countries whose peripheral status we are trying to correct lack the internal mechanisms to get works to readers and to publish the works of their authors. Thus an international solution must be complemented by local solutions.

I am not going to say much about the local distribution mechanisms, good well-funded libraries are of course an essential part of such mechanisms as are book and journal distribution systems and bookstores. These latter may seem ubiquitous and unproblematic, but during several consultancies in Azerbaijan, I was made aware of how much national infra-structure can be missing: a few years ago (I have not been back for 7 years) there were no bookshops outside the capital and not even a mechanism for moving parcels of books easily to other parts of the country. And by third world standards, while authoritarian, Azerbaijan is by no means at the bottom of the economic scale.

But I want to focus on how the works of authors get to the point of being plugged into international distribution networks. It is all very well having the capacity to achieve a balanced flow if the mechanism for putting items into the pipeline are absent or weak. It was again the experience in Azerbaijan that sensitized me to the importance of publishing mechanisms to gather, select, edit, and lay-out the work of local authors. It is always very educational to be confronted with the absence of things one has always taken for granted.

I do believe that free independent and creative book publishers are essential for a full and vigorous democratic society, for a flourishing literary culture, and for the essential discussion of serious ideas. While the need for free newspapers and magazines is generally appreciated, their main role is an immediate one, whereas books provide the channel for the serious and thorough exploration of ideas that is essential for slowly building a truly strong and mature free society.

So, any effort to redress the dominance of the Center should also be designed to nurture the publishing houses and the publishing infra-structures of the Periphery. "The parlous state of publishing in Africa is a direct consequence of the relative dominance of British publishing in Africa".² Bringing in multi-nationals is exactly the wrong way to help individual countries build or strengthen their indigenous publishing houses. Policies must be designed to nurture independence not dependence.

There is another essential characteristic of any publishing system and that is decentralization. Now here I am speaking of decentralization within a country. Publications disseminate ideas, ideas are subversive and rich in variety. One wants there to be vigorous competition between ideas. That cannot occur if the channels for publication are centralized.

² Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*, OUP 1992 p.279.

Many of the schemes proposed by those advocating reconstruction of the scholarly publishing system fail to provide for multiple competing channels by which ideas can reach readers. It is one of the beauties of the established system that there are many journals and many publishers, and while the rapid concentration of journal publishing raises serious economic concerns, the mechanisms are still firmly in place to deter a journal owner from trying to control the ideas that are published. But NIH data banks, university-wide repositories and many other apparently attractive schemes all lack the competitive structures that deter attempts to control, and put the dissemination of ideas into fewer hands. While those in charge may have no inclination to choose between competing theories in nuclear physics, they do have reasons for encouraging some social theories and discouraging others. Again, the overwhelming influence of scientists in the debate on reshaping the scholarly publishing system means important issues of freedom and the crucial importance of ensuring a variety of channels for diverse and subversive ideas are not being given sufficient weight in the discussions.

The process by which a raw manuscript is converted into a book and reaches a reader is a complex one, complex technically but also complex socially with a variety of institutions and informal arrangements that have developed slowly over the years. In a short paper such as this I cannot explore more than a few facets of the system

Sketching a Solution

Having delayed coming to the point for sometime, I will now briefly sketch a form of solution that I believe could meet some of the objectives that I have outlined. First, one wants to get away from the expensive and slow mechanisms by which heavy and bulky books are today slowly moved around the world, and for that some form of electronic distribution makes sense. Why do we not already do it? Because so far it is not cost effective for the small quantities involved in academic publishing and costs are still too high for purchasers in low-income countries. So widespread adoption of this method would require some further reduction in costs or some modest external support. Already the vestiges of such a system are developing, so far only in the developed world and controlled in all the cases I know by American companies, but several are now offering to archive a file in one location and generate books, using Print on Demand technology, in plants scattered around the world. Such a decentralized and inter-linked system, but not built on a single technology, is the kind of model that I want to advocate.

Computers are now cheap and laying out a book and creating a pdf file can be done without great difficulty and most countries have at least a little capacity of this kind. A programme might operate that made such capacity available more widely in developing countries, part of the motivation being to decentralize publishing within countries and thus lessen the central national control that is so often a major problem. If there are ways for those files to be exchanged easily between countries, we have a way of building an egalitarian system of nodes rather than a Centre-Periphery system. Here I echo Steve Harnad's distinction between writing for profit and writing for the exchange of ideas. I am firmly focused on the latter, and thus I am assuming that copyright issues can be handled and that the system can operate without significant inter-country payment issues (but I have addressed the payment issue elsewhere).

Now let us follow an example: a Vietnamese scholar writes a book and it is edited and laid-out by a local publisher. He then sends out a message to participating publishers in other countries describing the book and offering the pdf files. A Malaysian publisher considers its relevance for their readership and decide that it is something that Malaysian scholars would find interesting and valuable. He informs the Vietnamese publisher of his interest and the pdf files are sent through. The Malaysian publisher looks more closely at the work and decides

that it will be of interest to his customers. He then contacts the Vietnamese publisher again and is granted an exclusive license to the work in his territory. I am skipping over many details here, but such a license could be drafted and available to all participants in the system.

Now the Malaysian publisher knows his market and knows how best to publish the book and how to reach the potential audience in his country. The publishing is thus done appropriately for that country, and the availability of the work is maximized there. But at the same time, instead of a multi-national or an importer bringing books in, a local publisher gets another opportunity to hone its skills and strengthen its list.

Of course, one can foresee that some neighbouring countries might want to collaborate in one shared and thus more economical production run. The point of such a system must be to allow great variety in how books are published to suit each country, to provide the conditions under which publication can occur through a multitude of channels, and in the process to nurture local publishing houses.

Yes, there are a lot of detail problems to deal with, but I am confident that such a system could greatly improve the accessibility of work by scholars and do it without a large administrative apparatus. Some financial support for production costs would be needed in some situations, but the amounts involved would be modest.

In conclusion, this paper has two primary objectives, to argue for a more equal structure for the international dissemination of academic writings, and for books especially; and to argue that such a new structure must be designed to nurture local publishers and to nurture multiple channels in individual countries.