



# Academic Book Discovery, Evaluation and Access

Insights and opportunities  
for enhancing the  
scholarly experience

Anna Faherty

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**‘But what  
a tortuous,  
untraceable  
business the  
coming of  
knowledge is!’**

Oswald Sydenham in  
*The Story of an Education*  
H.G. Wells, 1918

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# Executive summary

This report summarises learnings from a small-scale exploratory study investigating how humanities academics encounter, evaluate and gain access to print and ebooks related to their research and teaching. The study seeks to understand the holistic user experience, mapping user journeys to identify aspects of book discovery and access that might be improved. The implications for academic libraries, publishers and booksellers are considered, as potential improvements to current systems are mooted along with opportunities for more disruptive innovation.

The study draws on data collected from dedicated interviews with academics and the wider publishing, information studies and researcher-experience literature. Its approach is heavily influenced by design methodologies, as the reality of academic practice is captured through visual tools and possible new academic experiences are generated through divergent thinking.

The results are shared as a series of insights and practical design questions intended to prompt innovative thinking across the academic publishing, bookselling and library sectors. Overall, this report serves two purposes: it is a research paper exploring the experience of academics as they seek out, assess and access book content and the first stage of a collaborative design project to enhance that experience.

## Key findings

- The journeys academics take to discover academic books, evaluate their relevance or usefulness and access the content within them are complex, multi-faceted, circuitous and fragmented. Academics employ multiple search and evaluation strategies, often at the same time, and use both institutional and third-party registration systems, which sometimes prevent access to desired materials.
- Discovery, evaluation and access is not necessarily a linear journey. The individual components may merge together within one event and evaluation may be a two stage process (deciding whether to gain access to a publication and then evaluating the content or approach in further detail once access has been gained). This suggests service providers developing processes or tools tackling only one of these stages may sometimes fail to address academics' needs.
- Academics in this study source known items using Amazon, publisher websites and online library catalogues. Unknown items are sometimes sourced from Google (but not usually Google Scholar or Google Books).
- Academics in this study use a number of sources to evaluate books, gathering information and reading sample material on Amazon, publishers' websites and Google Books. This suggests that, aside from the book itself, there is no single source offering sufficient information or content with which to evaluate a book for purchase or course recommendation.
- Online library catalogues are not used for discovering unknown items or for evaluating products, though physical library collections may be. This poses an important dilemma: should

academic libraries attempt to improve their discovery mechanisms or move their focus away from this role?

- Library catalogue functionality does not live up to academics' expectations of third-party search engines, causing frustration. Training does not appear to improve this situation.
- The academic user experience of library catalogues could be enhanced by implementing user-focused ranking and categorising of results, user-friendly interfaces and an element of 'browsability'.
- Some libraries have experimented with catalogue systems that present results within modular categories, contextualise individual records, provide additional search prompts or encourage browsing. However, these user-focused systems and interfaces are not the norm in UK university libraries.
- Access systems for remotely located items, such as inter-library loans, may deter users from consulting these sources. A rapid and user-focused experience could be provided by delivering inter-library loans in digital form.
- Publishers play an important role in discovery and evaluation, but have a limited direct role in access. Academics trust the search functionality and information provided on publisher sites but seek out lower prices, and a smoother purchase transaction, elsewhere. This prompts the question of whether publishers should sell direct to customers, rather than ceding this role to Amazon.
- Winning business away from Amazon would require new approaches to pricing and a concerted effort to build relationships with academics. Partnerships with online booksellers or other publishers might also open up fruitful opportunities to construct a consolidated and seamless purchasing experience.
- At least one publisher has developed a tool that guides users through a subject area, suggesting alternative search terms while enabling both search and browse functions. This could have wider potential as a user-focused discovery tool, particularly for unknown-item searches.
- Publishers' inspection copy systems, and particularly the access mechanisms and time limits associated with e-inspection copies, can be a source of frustration. This suggests these systems could be more user-focused. It also prompts questions about the nature of the publisher–academic relationship.
- Viewed from the user perspective, the traditional industry distinction between books and journals makes little sense. Academics would like to access individual monograph chapters in the same manner as journal articles.
- Amazon plays a major role in evaluation and access, while other booksellers are largely absent. Academics are drawn to Amazon by low prices, ease of purchase and the opportunity to buy at even lower cost from resellers. This prompts the question of what value other booksellers could, or should, offer academics.
- Buying from Amazon prompts feelings of guilt, suggesting that

academics may use another channel if it could compete on price and ease of purchase.

- Amazon has a limited role in discovery for unknown books, a function that was formerly supported by physical bookshops. There does not appear to be a discovery tool that successfully replicates the academic bookshop experience: easy browsing through a trusted collection of books, which may also be evaluated without restriction.
- This study has highlighted a number of user-focused opportunities to enhance the scholarly experience including:
  - designing catalogue search functionality that matches user expectations
  - supporting and guiding academics as they seek out unknown items and explore unfamiliar fields
  - providing easy and expansive access to descriptive information and content for evaluation purposes
  - offering streamlined and cost-efficient access to granular content
  - delivering access to remotely-located items quickly, easily and cheaply.

Though each of these issues has a natural home within the current ecosystem, these enhancements have the potential to be delivered by any of the current players (libraries, publishers, booksellers or third parties) as well as new entrants.

- Publishers, libraries and booksellers who are committed to enhancing the scholarly experience would benefit from being present when scholars need them, focusing on the needs of the end-user, embracing service models, adapting and collaborating.

## About the author

Anna Faherty has worked in the academic publishing sector for over two decades and in academia for the past six years. Anna held editorial positions within Hachette, Pearson, Cengage and Palgrave Macmillan before working with Oxford University Press, Taylor & Francis, SAGE and Wiley on freelance projects.

Anna has taught on publishing programmes at Kingston University and Oxford Brookes University and is an Honorary Lecturer at University College London and has developed bespoke training courses for a number of academic publishers. Her paper on novelty-centred business models in publishing won the *International Journal of the Book* 2014 International Award for Excellence and her online learning courses for professionals are part of an award-winning continuing professional development training suite.

When not researching or teaching publishing, Anna collaborates with museums and archives on a diverse range of print, digital and exhibition projects. Her clients include the British Museum, Design Museum, National Maritime Museum, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, V&A and Wellcome Collection.

Anna blogs at [strategiccontent.co.uk/blog](http://strategiccontent.co.uk/blog) and tweets as [@mafunyane](https://twitter.com/mafunyane).

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**Funded by The Academic Book of the Future**

academicbookfuture.org

To cite this report:

Faherty, A. (2016) Academic Book Discovery, Evaluation and Access: Insights and Opportunities for Enhancing the Scholarly Experience EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, Strategic Content.