

Study on the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program and on the Scholarly Book Situation in Canada

Executive summary

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The Awards to Scholarly Publications Program (ASPP) is a joint initiative of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), which directly supports book publishers and the dissemination of Canadian research in the humanities and social sciences (HSS). The Federation receives an annual grant of \$1,808,550 from SSHRC to support the publication of 180 original works and five translations and to absorb the administrative costs of the program. The grant has not been re-assessed since 2005–06.

The manuscripts submitted for the competition are assessed by at least two external readers. Based on their opinion, the Federation ranks the works and awards the grants. Publishers are paid \$8,000 for publications and \$12,000 for translations once the books are released. Since 1941, the ASPP has contributed to the publication of 8,000 books.

The goal of this study is to (1) share the program's achievements, (2) look at the vitality of scholarly books and their importance as a structuring factor in HSS research, (3) understand the financing of scholarly book publishing in Canada, (4) understand the ASPP's role in this ecosystem and how publishers see its contribution, and, lastly, (5) make recommendations to support the ASPP, the Federation and SSHRC in their mission to promote books as a vehicle for building and disseminating knowledge.

The study is based on an analysis of ASPP administrative data and external data sets, on bibliometric analyses and on a review of the literature, particularly reports on related issues. Ten publishers were also consulted in 2018: six university presses (one French and five English) and four publishers that specialize in non-fiction (two French and two English).

A first draft of this report (unpublished) was prepared in 2018 and was updated in 2022.

I. SOME BACKGROUND ABOUT THE ASPP

Between 2005 and 2020, the ASPP processed 4,012 applications, including 78 requests for translation, and supported the publication of 2,592 books. The translation component, available since 2006, is evidently underused, as only 56 grants were awarded of the 75 available during this period. In terms of subject matter, the ASPP attracts a large number of historical works (19% of titles submitted and published) and literary works (around 9%). A previous evaluation report (2004) did call attention to this trend. The program does not favour certain disciplines, which already feature relatively consistent success rates (around 60%).

During the period in question, the University of Toronto Press, the McGill-Queens University Press and UBC Press published over 73.4% of the books supported (27.7%, 23.2% and 22.5%). The fourth, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, lagged far behind with 4.5% of publications. For the Big Three presses, the amounts collected from the ASPP exceed the grants from the Canada Council for the

Arts or the Canada Book Fund (this was the situation in 2014–2015, the last year for which the Canada Book Fund published its figures). The *Presses de l'Université de Montréal* and Athabasca University Press are in the same situation. This shows how important this source of funding is for some publishers.

Although different types of publishers produce scholarly books in HSS—university presses, specialized publishers, i.e., which publish mainly essays, and generalist publishing houses, 95% of the books supported by the ASPP are published by presses. This concentration is lower for French books (71.5%) than for English (98.5%).

II. HSS BOOKS: SUPPLY, DEMAND, USES

The commercial vibrancy of HSS books: stability and oversupply

It is hard to assess production and commercial vitality in publishing and even harder in the case of scholarly publishing because data is scarce, incomplete and inconsistent, both nationally and internationally. However, studies agree on certain trends. The production of HSS books seems fairly stable; it essentially tracks trends in the book trade. The production of scholarly books (university presses) seems to be increasing in Canada and around the world. Sales volume is at best stable. However, because of the increase in titles published, the number of units sold per title is dropping. Demand is not tracking supply and some observers point to overproduction.

Demand from university libraries: recent decline and preference for digital

The reduction in acquisition budgets for books is fairly recent and is not explained solely by the “periodicals crisis.” The turn of this decade saw some streamlining of acquisition policies, now based on the analysis of the use of collections, which resulted in a sharp decline in the borrowing and consulting of print works. Added to that is the fact that libraries now prefer digital versions when acquiring books. These two factors are eating away at publisher revenues and raising the question: with the internet and digital technology, what added value does a print book offer? Part of the answer comes from what scholars do with the books.

Books in scholarly communication: declines and disciplinary resistance

Studies of lists of references appearing in HSS journals indexed in the Web of Science reveal a number of things.

Worldwide, between 1995 and 2000, the book/article ratio has tipped in favour of the article. In Canadian journals, the tipping point occurred around 2000 and was practically simultaneous in all fields, except in professional domains where the switchover occurred earlier (between 1985 and 1990). The changes may be due to the emergence of digital technology, which is completely transforming methods of disseminating knowledge and access to resources. However, disciplinary resistance suggests that some knowledge does not fully lend itself to publication in the form of articles.

Already in the 1980s, the book was in the minority when it comes to psychology. This field of HSS has a long tradition of scholarly communication through articles, probably out of its affinity with medicine. There has been resistance in arts and humanities. The market share of books is in a slower decline in this area, and books still predominate (close to 70% of citations). In literature, the presence of books is remarkably stable and central (80%). History, the arts and religion have also maintained a predilection for books. In fact, history is the only discipline in which the share of books

is increasing slightly. These are also the disciplines in which the most books are published and which most rely on the ASPP. The decline of the book in favour of the journal is striking in management, criminology, urban studies, political science and information science.

Looking at the average number of books cited in lists of references rather than the book/article ratio, it increases over time (as does the number of articles), although very differently among disciplines. In the arts and humanities, the number of books and articles cited is similarly growing. In psychology, the curve is almost flat: there were barely more books cited in 2020 than in 1980, but there were many more articles.

As to whether literature is renewing itself through books, it does seem to be the case. In lists of references, the average age of books is only a little higher than the age of all the literature. The arts and humanities, however, traditionally make use of very old literature: in 2020, the average age of books cited was 30 years.

Lastly, to judge the position of books in the circulation of ideas, we can look at changes in the number of book reviews in journals and assume that this reflects the importance of the book to the scientific community. With the exception of information science, the share of reviews compared with other texts is declining in every discipline. This share has decreased only slightly and remains very high for history and religious studies (over 60% of contributions appearing in journal summaries). In disciplines like sociology, political science, communication, geography, economics and social work, there was a major drop.

Books, academic careers and the development of knowledge

Disciplines where researchers see books as an essential form of publication for their career are also those which bibliometric analyses have identified as most attached to books: regional studies, classics, literature, history, arts and religion. While researchers from different disciplines place varying importance on book publishing, they all agree on the need to write articles.

Beyond the instrumental vision of the book and beyond considerations of sales and readership figures, we need to recognize that books are also a growth technology. It makes it possible to develop concepts at length, to question theoretical frameworks and confront prospects, since the writing itself is part of the development of thought. It also makes it possible to transfer this intellectual engagement and ideas outside academic circles. Books “make an important contribution to knowledge,”¹ in both the author’s and the reader’s mind.

A crisis of citation, discoverability and accessibility

Overall, books are experiencing a decline in use among researchers, although this trend is less pronounced in arts and literature. We can suggest at least four factors:

1. Books are victims of the “publish or perish” imperative. In a context of pressure to publish, time is not on the side of books. Over the many months it takes to write one book, one can write several articles. . . resulting in more citations.
2. In some disciplines, articles are better suited to disseminating research as it is practiced today. For example, economics has become an empirical discipline that does not need many pages in a book to be developed.

¹ Mission of the ASPP, <http://www.ideas-idees.ca/aspp/faq>, consulted May 23, 2018 [defunct, currently: <https://www.federationhss.ca/en/programs-policies/aspp>].

3. The more researchers disseminate their work through articles, the more lists of references referring to their work will favour articles.
4. Articles are immediately accessible on line and easy to find. At best, books will exist in digital format. Their dissemination, indexing and “discoverability” by search engines are problematic.

With the development of the web, we have seen books starting to drop in importance in lists of references. We have also seen that libraries tend to focus on electronic acquisitions. The digital shift has created new requirements:

- The requirement to optimize referencing by search engines: A poorly referenced book may not be discovered.
- Accessibility requirements: Users want a sense of what is in the book before buying or borrowing it, or want to consult the entire paper immediately on line, as they can with articles.

Some authors question the added value of print books and suggest thinking of books as digital objects first, designed primarily to meet these requirements. Printing would be reserved for titles with strong sales potential or which the publisher wants to promote to the general public. Other titles would be printed on demand, with users paying printing and distribution costs. It's a complex cultural change that we cannot rush and which requires the cooperation of the entire book chain (publishers, authors, distributors, users, bookstores, funding agencies. . .), but that is starting to be well documented thanks to the experience of publishers featuring open access.

III. FUNDING SCHOLARLY BOOKS IN CANADA

The costs

Scholarly books are expensive to produce... more expensive than journals or works of fiction. These costs cannot be reduced without compromising excellence. These are related to the book as object, in its form and content, and to the structure entailed in its manufacture, promotion and dissemination. In 2014, for its four largest presses, ACUP calculated an average cost of \$16,135 (publication, evaluation and non-print manufacturing), an amount close to what has been reported elsewhere and much higher than the \$8,000 the “ASPP Publication Grant provides . . . to offset the cost of publication.”² This is in addition to the costs of promotion, distribution, copyrighting, the publishing house’s overhead and printing. The average price is roughly double the award, in other words.

Revenue

Publishers have five sources of income, one of them being grants, including the ASPP:

Sales revenue. Academic books don’t have significant sales, and that figure continues to decrease. Sales are not zero, however, and they can still help balance a budget. The reason presses are adopting commercial business practices is to avoid incurring losses rather than to generate revenue.

Institutional support. The support presses receive from their parent university is both financial and in kind. This support is critical to allowing books to exist outside of commercial considerations. The presses are recognized as a service to the intellectual community and as an element of the research infrastructure. However, this support is regularly threatened by a managerial vision of the university and the resulting pressure to self-finance.

² <http://www.ideas-idees.ca/aspp/publishers> [defunct, currently: <https://www.federationhss.ca/en/programs-policies/aspp>].

The contribution of authors. This is not done as a matter of course but is a non-negligible contribution to the economic balance of publishers, presses in particular. If authors do not want to submit their book to the ASPP competition—generally over issues of publication timing—or if a book does not receive a grant, they may be encouraged instead to obtain funding from research funds or their department. This sometimes results in complicated financial arrangements or delays in publishing.

Reproduction rights. Changes to provisions for the fair dealing of books protected by copyright in teaching have resulted in substantial losses in revenue in English Canada. Quebec publishers have so far been spared.

Grants. Grants are awarded based on scientific excellence criteria (ASPP), the contribution to culture (e.g., the Canada Council for the Arts) and commercial performance (e.g. Canada Book Fund). While the ASPP's primary objective is not to support publishers financially—it supports books—it in fact remains a structural resource for some publishers. For five presses, the ASPP amount received in 2014-15 was greater than the amounts granted by the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts. For other publishers, funding from the ASPP is less consequential and is seen more like a prize than a grant.

Scholarly books: the poor cousin when it comes to support for research publishing

Except for the ASPP, grants are not specific to HSS, which is a threat for scholarly publishing and for non-fiction in general, which is at the mercy of policy and evaluation criteria changes that do not reflect their reality. This threat has become a reality with the recent program review at the Canada Council for the Arts. Only literary non-fiction is eligible now. This excludes “reference, academic, scholarly or educational publications [. . .], as well as transcripts of conference papers, unless they make a significant literary contribution.”³ Other grant eligibility criteria for publishers or books are problematic, for example:

- Revenue when sales of titles are limited or even non-existent in the case of books with open access.
- The payment of copyright royalties, equally problematic for open access, but also for collective works where authors relinquish their royalties.
- Whether authors are Canadian citizens or permanent residents when the Canadian content of the topic could make a substantial contribution to the advance of knowledge.
- The minimum print run of books, which can be too high for this type of literature and accordingly exclude strictly digital publication, towards which some publishers could lean.
- The prohibition against asking authors to finance their books.

Given these difficulties, there are two possible, equally problematic, responses: make the editorial program as “non-academic” as possible in the hope of selling it better, with consequences for research as it is currently disseminated and shaped or, on the contrary, removing scholarly books from the traditional—commercial—market to save money on distribution. Publishers insist on the responsibility of organizations that subsidize research but too often neglect to consider the costs and broader economics of its distribution—for example, when SSHRC is considering mandating open access to ASPP-supported works.

³ https://canadacouncil.ca/glossary/literary-non-fiction?_ga=2.99227990.935269713.1544714892-352424370.1544714892, consulted September 12, 2018.

IV. CONTRIBUTION OF THE ASPP TO SCHOLARLY BOOKS AND THE EVALUATION OF PUBLISHERS

As a *grant*, the contribution of the ASPP to scholarly publishing is clear. But as a *prize*, when it comes to books, the ASPP's impact through its existence, eligibility criteria and evaluation process is fairly marginal. Publishers are even fairly critical of this. Their criticisms are mainly about evaluations.

- Publishers have their books evaluated, whether or not they are submitted to the ASPP.
- Manuscripts are submitted which have a good chance of receiving the grant and have already had positive evaluations. Publishers must provide at least one of the two evaluations to the Federation.
- Unanimous evaluations are therefore sought, although they say negative ones are more constructive and markedly improve the quality of books.
- They submit near-finished manuscripts, almost ready to print, to avoid receiving negative comments, which would be more about form than substance, but which would reduce the score for the book. Yet, by judging books at this stage of completion, the ASPP does not really influence their quality.
- In an effort to receive unanimous evaluations, publishers submit fairly conservative books and publish the more original or polemical ones or the ones that will appeal to the general public without ASPP support.
- Most of the time, the decision to publish has been made before the competition. Projects are rarely abandoned because they don't receive the award. The publication may be delayed, however, as other sources of funding are sought.

The ASPP doesn't make books better; the quality of books, it seems, *predates* their journey through the ASPP process. However, it contributes to freedom to publish without commercial constraints, a form of academic freedom. As a granting agency, the ASPP is therefore an essential resource for scholarly communication and Canadian research.

V. RECOGNIZE AND SUPPORT BOOKS AS A COMPONENT OF THE HSS RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

Scholarly books are in a complex phase in which economic models, technical standards and forms of scholarly communication are being rethought. Books, a long form of communication that is different from and complementary to articles, must be recognized as an integral part of the HSS research infrastructure, and supported as such, even though they are in need of change. . . *particularly* because they are under pressure to change. The situation must not call into question the importance of books in HSS and limit their financing but, on the contrary, better support publishers that guide books through these transformations.

Publishers are unanimously pleased with the existence of a program like the ASPP. However, they all believe that the program should be reviewed, and most of them support major changes. More generally, publishers point to the responsibility of the research community and primarily SSHRC. The responsibility for funding research at every stage, including the final one, which is dissemination. The added responsibility not to impose measures without making a careful assessment of their effects or having consulted all players directly affects open access.

To enable the ASPP, the Federation and SSHRC to complete their mission to support the dissemination of Canadian HSS research, we recommend (1) in the short term, refinancing the amounts granted and making simple adjustments; (2) in the medium term, transforming block grants; and (3) in the longer term, a shared reflection to support changes to scholarly books.

In the short term: review amounts and open up genres

Increase the basic grant and funding of translations but, most importantly, do not fund fewer books

The grant amount has not been reviewed since 2005-06. Its review should at least reflect inflation. The amounts suggested by publishers would increase from \$9,000 to \$15,000. If the increase reflected only inflation, the 2018 grant would be \$9,803. However, if resources remain unchanged, publishers prefer that the number of books funded remains unchanged as well, rather than awarding more money to fewer projects. Likewise, if a choice had to be made, they would prefer that any increase in SSHRC budget translate into an increase in the number of books supported rather than an increase in the basic amount.

The \$12,000 grant for translation is often too low to even bother making the application. Publishers suggest that the translation grant be \$20,000 or \$25,000 or that the Federation calculate its support the way the Canada Council for the Arts does (18 cents a word), in addition to the basic grant; or that this part of the program be cancelled. Indeed, this component of the program is under-utilized.

Support alternative scholarly books

Books are also how research leaves academia to reach out to another audience. This desire to encourage knowledge transfer to society is clearly exhibited by SSHRC. It is also the desire of universities and researchers themselves. The ASPP can remain an “elitist” program, focused exclusively on scientific excellence and scholarly communication among peers, or expand its mission to support non-fiction that is less exclusive in terms of audience, with a less academic form and presentation. If the ASPP’s mission were to expand, books could be submitted in two categories: scholarly books and popularization/innovation. Instructions for the two assessors would be adapted to reflect the particulars and objectives of each of the two genres.

This would expand the pool of publishers for the ASPP, a welcome move given the new Canada Council for the Arts policy. But this would also support and reward the efforts of presses that, without compromising their rigour, would like to take on occasional projects for a wider readership and encourage more original approaches.

In the medium term: disambiguate the ASPP’s mission in favour of a block grant

The ASPP is suffering from ambiguity: it is an award for the author and a de facto grant for certain publishers, but a grant that is distributed inefficiently, termed old-fashioned by some, and doesn’t increase the quality of editorial production. Almost all of the publishers met with (9 out of 10) spontaneously argued in favour of transforming the ASPP into a block grant or responded favourably to the suggestion. Block grants are preferred for the time savings they represent, but particularly for the flexibility they provide for allocating the amount received. The idea here is to give publishers more freedom to reinvent approaches in which the ASPP, by funding titles, supports publishers.

For publishers, block grants have the advantage of

- Freeing up resources that could be invested in editorial and creative work, in supporting authors, in promotional activities, etc., which provide books with added value;

- Authorizing more reactive programming that does not depend on ASPP decisions, that is more in step with the times, and therefore more illuminating for social debates;
- Allowing for the possibility of publishing books in less canonical and more original forms, which will potentially generate more debate and interest outside of academia;
- Providing more room for innovation, including:
 - Searching for new forms of scholarly communication and evaluation,
 - Introducing tools and processes that smooth the transition to better referenced, distributed and monitored, and more accessible, digital books,
 - Searching for new economic models,
 - Innovating in promotion and communication.

As suggested by publishers, the distribution of grants could draw inspiration from the method previously used by the Canada Council for the Arts, which is based on production reports. As such, publishers would provide

- The list of eligible titles published during the year,
- Proof that they have been peer-reviewed,
- The detail of production costs for each title,
- A presentation of its past and future editorial program, along with a few indicators to evaluate the qualitative and quantitative impact of its production (a list of indicators that could be provided by the Federation),
- The presentation of other efforts to contribute to the dissemination of knowledge and the vitality of scholarly communication.

The Federation will judge the eligibility of titles and the overall quality of production and the publisher's activities. The amount of the grant would be calculated based on production expenditures and weighted by merit points that reflect the quality of the publisher's contribution to Canadian scholarly communication. Grants would be capped to prevent a handful of publishers eating up the entire budget.

This approach recognizes both the quality of books produced and the quality of the publisher's work. It reconciles the ASPP's two approaches: support for academic excellence (prize approach) and support for academic publishing (grant approach). For the Federation, the advantage is twofold: administrative streamlining and, above all, a greater ability to evaluate and support excellence in scholarly publishing.

In the longer term: support a changing ecosystem

Canadian books have to improve and rationalize their digital existence, but the means to do so are complicated to design and implement. Given this complexity and lack of mature solutions on different levels—i.e. formats, publishing tools, distribution, dissemination, preservation, commercialization, funding—nationwide consultations and discussions are required to find effective, lasting solutions.

Open access and the creation of a digital dissemination platform, for example, are two initiatives that could help improve the discoverability and accessibility of books and take them to a better place. These are also complicated topics that require a great deal of thought and cooperation. This requires proper understanding of needs and of the implications and consequences of planned efforts by all players in the book chain, not only by publishers (researchers, users, libraries, disseminators and distributors, granting agencies for publishing and research, universities and teaching and research

institutions, physical and digital, academic and general interest book stores), in order for the entire industry to arrive at informed, prudent provisions that are not counterproductive.

Canadian scholarly publishing needs the power of conviction and unity to defend books, but also to synergize, jointly study the situation, define needs and formulate joint action. SSHRC and the Federation have often been designated by publishers as legitimate forces to play this role.

This consultation could lead to a national strategy for scholarly publishing, which would not be limited to reflecting on the future of books but would include journals and other forms of communication that are part of the same ecosystem and serve the same purpose of disseminating knowledge.