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# Overview : Academic Publishing in Asean

by S. Gopinathan

## Introduction

This overview essay has two major objectives. It seeks to provide a context to the papers that were presented at the Seminar on Academic Publishing in the Asean Region and to highlight the issues that were brought up at the meeting. Specifically, the Seminar was intended to provide participants with both an opportunity to analyse critically the environment in which academic publishing occurs, to discuss ways of improving the cost-effectiveness of academic publishing and to examine marketing strategies that had worked in other parts of the world.

Asean higher education has reached a fairly high level of maturity and accomplishment in the past decade. A number of universities have developed an impressive research capability. Advanced degree programmes have proliferated; library and laboratory resources have grown. The basic infrastructures of modern academic institutions are now common in the region. Each Asean nation possesses at least one, and in several instances more than one, university which is at or approaching, 'world-class' standards in terms of academic facilities and quality. This is a development which is often ignored in discussions of the problems of knowledge production and dissemination in the region.

As a consequence of developments in higher education, knowledge production in the region has grown impressively and Southeast Asian universities are beginning to be counted among the world's producers and users of knowledge. New university presses and other scholarly publishers have been established. A number of academic journals have been founded as well. There is now at least the rudiments of a network for transmitting knowledge. However, means to disseminate this knowledge and to transmit it to students and others, both within and without Southeast Asia, shows a more uneven

pattern of growth. Further, the need for post-secondary level textbooks, particularly in indigenous languages, has not as yet been fully met, especially in countries which use their national language as the main medium of higher education. Many scholars choose to have their work published in the North, and in an international language, rather than using local or Southern publishing houses. Thus, there are some problems with the knowledge dissemination network despite the growth in publishing in recent years.

### Current Issues

Among the issues identified for discussion at the Seminar were the following. It was these issues that country participants were asked to consider in their papers.

1. Role of academic publishing. It seems clear that the very limited role adopted by the Western academic presses is inappropriate in Asean, but just what is the role of the university press and other academic publishing institutions in the context of a developing academic and social system?
2. The language issue. Unlike the university presses in the North which publish in their own 'metropolitan' languages, Asean presses face serious problems relating to the language of publication. If English is used, it cuts off a considerable part of the scholarly audience in many Asean countries. If other languages are used, the international market, both institutional and individual, is reduced, probably below the level of viability.
3. Book distribution. A problem in any setting, distribution is particularly difficult in a situation where there is a multiplicity of languages, where the market for books is limited and where the usual buyers of scholarly books — libraries — are in short supply. The special problem of distributing books to overseas markets is serious, particularly where the bulk of potential sales of many scholarly books is in the North, particularly Europe and North America.
4. New technologies. Publishing is faced with a variety of new technological developments in the fields of composition, printing and reproduction. How should Asean publishers prepare for the advent of electronic publishing? Have these new technologies the potential of reducing the cost of production of scholarly books?
5. National, regional and international cooperation. While there have been some efforts in this direction, the resources of individual universities within a country have not, in general, been combined effectively for any of the functions of academic publishing. What can be done to encourage co-publishing?

## Academic Publishing and the International System

Publishers in the Third World are inherently at a disadvantage in an international context dominated by the industrialized nations of the West. Yet it is in both the interests of the Third World and the First that the scholarship of the Third World reaches the First. Scholarly books published in the Third World frequently deal with questions directly relevant to their societies and then offer perspectives different from the West. Indigenous publishers provide a necessary outlet for Third World scholars, who may have problems dealing with publishers in the industrialized West. Often a study that is not published regionally will not be published at all for lack of interest elsewhere. Yet books from the Third World require an international market, for the local or even regional market may be too small to support the costs of publishing a specialized monograph.

### Inequalities

The basic fact about the international system of knowledge is its inequality. Despite some changes, the control over international scholarly communication is firmly in the hands of the Western industrialized nations. There are many reasons for this situation, among them the location of the major journals, databases, and other resources in the West. The libraries and expertise of such institutions as the School of Oriental and African Studies, the John M Echols collection at Cornell, facilities for research in the Southeast Asian and South Asian societies are available at Chicago, Harvard, UCLA, Yale and other major US universities. So are the headquarters of multinational publishing houses — Oxford University Press, Longman, McGraw Hill, Prentice-Hall and Harper and Row to mention only a few — which continue to play an important role in Southeast Asia.

The major Western publishers cater in general to their largest and most immediate markets — the Western scholarly communities, where most of their authors are also to be found. The major scholarly journals are edited in the industrialized nations and their editors, reviewers, and most of their readers as well are located there. The concerns of these publishers are determined by their location, by locally dominant research paradigms, and by their readers, writers, and editors. All these factors make it difficult for a Third World scholar to gain access to the major international journals and book publishers.

This structural inequality is compounded by traditional patterns of intellectual exchange. The libraries, moreover, primarily buy books from the major publishing nations and resist books from other nations. They buy journals which are internationally recognized and which are recommended by

faculty members. It is accordingly difficult for Southeast Asian books and journals, as well as authors, to gain access to the West. A further problem is that there is very little trade in books amongst the countries of the South.

Language is another key issue in the network of inequality. The major metropolitan languages, English and French, tend to dominate international scholarly communication, with Spanish playing a much less important role, largely in Latin America, and Russian influential in its area of political domination and certain disciplinary areas. The bulk of the internationally circulated scholarly books and journals are published in English. Scholars who wish to reach an international audience tend increasingly to write in these languages. Increasingly, publishers in non-metropolitan areas are issuing materials in English or French. In the Third World, local journals are frequently published in a metropolitan language and universities often demand that scholars publish in an 'international journal' to be eligible for promotion. The major international databases are also in the metropolitan languages and many abstracting and reference services, such as the ERIC System in the United States, tend to cover material only in the major Western languages, mainly English. Scholarly publishers in Southeast Asia who wish access to an international audience must publish in English, and even then can rarely expect more than a small, specialized institutional sale only.

The norms and values of much scholarship, and consequently of publication, also tend to be Western. Quantitative social science, for example, dominates American sociology and political science and the major U.S. journals in those fields. Third World scholars who do not have access to computer facilities to analyse data, or who find it difficult to collect that kind of data, or who feel that local realities make other approaches to research more appropriate, may have great difficulty getting published in international forums.

The Third World has only limited funds for scholarly books and journals, and a disproportionate amount of that is taken up by purchases of publications from the West. Local publishers frequently depend on foreign sales when deciding to publish a book. For instance, Indian scholarly publishers assume that a significant portion of their modest press runs, sometimes up to one-half, will be sold overseas, largely in North America and Britain. This means that the books published in the Third World are determined, at least in part, by the local perception of interest in a foreign marketplace. Only a few networks permit scholarly books published in one part of the Third World to be circulated effectively in another part. Generally, the pattern of trade still follows the old colonial ties — from North to South rather than South to South.

## The Southeast Asian Response

The scholarly publishing scene in Southeast Asia, as indicated in the papers presented at the Seminar, presents a mixed picture. In Singapore the University of Singapore Press and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies are major publishers whose books meet international production standards; the almost exclusive use of English for academic publishing means that the access to international and regional markets is enhanced. The SUP and ISEAS have a backlist of several hundred academic titles and ISEAS, with an annual average output of 25 titles and 3 journals, is Singapore's biggest academic publisher. The Philippines has a long tradition of research-based publishing going back to the Spanish colonial period; today the major university presses are the Ateneo de Manila, De La Salle and the University of the Philippines presses. These three presses have about 140 books in their catalogues, most of them published in the last two decades. Though higher education is largely in English, more attention is being given to the writing of tertiary-level texts and research monographs in Pilipino. Malaysian university presses in their turn have adapted to the shift to Bahasa Malaysia. Malaysian tertiary institutions had by 1985 published about 175 titles while the Dewan Bahasa was responsible for some 330 titles, most of them texts, literary works or translations. Translation made up two-thirds of the total output of Malaysian academic publishers. An interesting development in Malaysia was the use of 'trial editions' with lower editorial and production standards. These books were designed to get into the hands of students quickly with a subsequent final edition published later.

Thailand and Indonesia have less advanced tertiary publishing sectors. The great majority of titles in Thailand are published in Thai and there is a fairly substantial number of translations. University press publishing is of recent origin with the Thammasat University and Chulalongkorn University presses being the most significant. In addition several commercial publishers, especially the Thai Watana Panich Press, the Social Science Association of Thailand and the National Education Commission, publish academic texts. One recent estimate put the number of titles published to date by the nine leading academic publishers at about 2,528, though it must be assumed that the number of research-based texts will be considerably less.

Indonesia, which seems the most disadvantaged, has at least six university presses and several private sector academic publishers but the university presses are not yet as productive as the commercial publishers. The three major university presses are the University of Indonesia Press, the Gadjah Mada University Press and the Bandung Institute of Technology Press. Figures culled

from Unesco annual book production statistics indicate that in 1982 and 1983 about 100 and 56 university theses respectively were published.

Some significant progress has been made in the publication of scholarly journals. Journal publication is in some ways less demanding than a book publishing programme and has the advantage of faster production, relatively lower cost and being of special value to newer disciplines or inter-disciplinary areas. Both Singapore and the Philippines have their share of major journals; with the Philippines boasting some 200 journals. Among the major journals published in the region are the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* and the *Singapore Journal of Tropical Georgraphy* (Singapore), the *Philippine Journal of Linguistics*, *Philippine Social Science and Humanities Review*, *Philippine Studies*, *Solidarity*, the *Journal of History* (Philippines), *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *Tenggara*, *Nusantara*, *Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia Journal* (Malaysia) and *Annals Bogorienses*, *Merara Perkebunan*, *Reinwardita*, and *Majalah Kedokteran Indonesia* (Indonesia).

Even though the achievements are noteworthy, many problems face the academic publisher in Southeast Asia. The provision of textbooks, especially needed in the indigenous languages, has not been entirely satisfactory. However, the emphasis on university level textbooks, though understandable, hampers the publication of original research. It has become increasingly difficult to find proficient translators, not to mention the time element involved in translation. If there is an enlarged student base in the Asean countries it is also true that many cannot afford to buy textbooks and so effective demand is much smaller; for scholarly books the photocopy industry makes the market is even smaller. Indeed some versions of textbooks are nothing more than compilations of photocopied handouts. Then there is the important problem of export markets. Though this market is small, an additional purchase of 200 to 300 copies can make a difference. However, Southeast Asian books are not either in the region or outside it in large numbers due in part to inadequate market links and because of differences in the language of publication. Even within a country, postal charges can add considerably to the cost of a book in rural areas. Finally, it must be remembered that Southeast Asian publishing is still underdeveloped. The special skills needed to write an academic manuscript, to edit, produce and market, are still in short supply.

## The Economics of Academic Publishing

Solutions to the problems caused by painstakingly produced academic

texts which then have to be relatively highly priced in order to overcome the limitations of small markets were explored in several papers at the Seminar. New technologies were rapidly being made available which could cut down the cost of production and printing; what features and techniques of short-run academic publishing as practiced in other countries were applicable to Asean?

It was clear that even in the wealthy and well-organized U.S. market the patterns of academic publishing are changing. The big university presses are now looking for trade blockbusters and are not beyond producing coffee-table books or even cookbooks. In some instances this has meant the curtailing of large editorially and typographically complex scholarly editions and many big university presses are letting more titles go out of print. Also both the non-profit and for-profit houses are now attempting to focus their lists of books on specific areas like regional studies, local authors, and state politics and history.

By contrast, the challenges facing academic publishing in a developing country like India are quite different. Most academic titles are published by for profit publishers. However, unlike the U.S. government, policies in the area of paper imports and tax, funding for libraries and credit facilities have serious consequences for academic publishers. Other factors like language fragmentation, poor quality authorship requiring heavy editorial work and underdeveloped distribution networks so common in the Asean context, add to the burden of publishing.

The responses to the challenges facing academic publishers in the U.S. and India must necessarily be different. In the U.S. for instance, authors are increasingly being asked to produce camera ready copy, to pay part of production costs and/or be responsible for proof-reading. Also publishers are becoming increasingly aggressive in the pursuit of financial grants and the sponsored book tailored to the requirements of a corporate customer is becoming more popular. Academic publishers are also putting aside more funds for high-profile advertising and lavish catalogues. More significantly, the trend is towards shorter print runs. Other innovations include the publication of titles in series which allows for savings in cover design and using blurb and catalogue copy imaginatively in form letters, advertising copy, and in mailing lists. Computer/word-processor facilities facilitate this. A principal consideration seems to be to keep as many of the costs down though still striving for self-sufficiency.

Other ways of cutting costs that could be explored include more attempts at co-publishing either with other publishers in the country or overseas, using freelance editors, using sales personnel on contract and using less expensive paper and binding.

Some of the strategies listed above offer valuable examples to Asean

publishers. Cost-cutting cannot be at the expense of quality of work for once that is compromised the whole rationale for academic publishing is put at risk. A distinct publishing identity and a reputation for quality is very important for successful sales. Even when present circumstances are not favourable the goal must be kept constantly in mind. It would also seem necessary to hold the issue of exports in some perspective. Traditional patterns of trade suggest that the markets are overseas but this is perhaps only true if the work in question is of major significance; what is often ignored is the necessity to promote in and build up the local and regional market.

### The Marketing of Academic Books

Related to the question of improving market size is the issue of distribution. Several issues related to this aspect were considered in detail at the Seminar ranging from the aspect of more systematic Third World — Third World and First World — Third World co-operation, to the most efficient way of developing an accurate profile of the market. There was constant emphasis on the need for the marketing team to develop in-depth knowledge of the customer. It was stressed that there is a need to develop a large mailing list of institutions and of individual academics, acquisition librarians and book clubs. This is particularly important in a country where the purchasing habit is ill-developed and bookshops are inconveniently located. A related aspect that publishers need to keep in mind is the needs of overseas institutions in making text recommendations. Bulk sales would be possible for new groups of customers if the product and the marketing was suitably tailored. In the U.S. and U.K. there are specialised publications eg. *Literary Market Place*, *International Literary Market Place*, *Ulrich's International Periodical Directory*, *Library Journal*, *Choice*, that are useful tools in planning a marketing strategy and targetting customers. It was also suggested that when catalogues are prepared the needs of the foreign librarian/bookseller should be kept firmly in mind and tailored to accordingly.

Another major marketing device, extensively used in the U.S. and Europe is the exhibition of academic titles at the annual meetings of Scholarly Societies. These meetings bring together large numbers of specialists and often librarians and provide a valuable forum for the display of books. These meetings, rather than the more generalised all-purpose book fairs, are likely to be of more significance to the scholarly publisher. Another form of desirable publicity is the use of international advisory panels to promote and maintain the quality of journal publications. The message for Asean publishers was to re-examine the utility of using a wide range of promotional techniques and to

assess what particular mix was required for various types of books.

Asean publishers could also explore the possibility of using the services of mailing firms. It is clear that little selling in the region is done via the direct sales method, perhaps because the expertise is not yet available in individual companies. Firms dealing with mailing services do everything from preparing copy to preparing envelopes and mailing them. It would also be useful to explore the possibility of using membership lists of associations, for example, social science associations, to reach academics. However, the caution was voiced that too much reliance on mailing lists could distance the producer from the customer and some form of personal contact via salesmen would still be necessary.

Several examples were provided of the ways in which co-publishing and other cooperative ventures would be a boon to academic publishers. The Australian National University Co-publishers with Oxford University Press in Kuala Lumpur published a number of titles which are likely to be of interest to a Australian academic audience. Several U.S. titles of interest to an Indian audience had special Indian editions marketed through Indian publishers. From Germany came the example of groups formed for the purpose of the joint promotion of books. These groups — in the area of civil engineering and architecture, natural science, and medical books and journals — produce joint catalogues and jointly exhibit at books exhibitions. From the U.S. came the example of U.S. university presses offering warehousing and market arrangements for academic publishers too small to have independent operations in the U.S.

The use of new technologies in academic publishing predictably aroused much interest. For some it was a promise that publishers had not adequately grasped. It was suggested that the new technologies offered new means of inputting and printing, new means of intangible access and dissemination, new non-paper physical formats for storing the printed word, and new means of reproducing facsimile and repackaging from stored information. Data stored in on-line databases could present publishers with new opportunities for packaging information. There was wide acceptance that some dramatic change had already occurred — authors were beginning to provide copy in machine readable form thus helping publishers to save composition costs and reducing the time-span and risk of error for both parties in the total production process. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies editor reported that manuscripts were already being received on 5¼" and 8½" disc.

The dissenting view took the position that in essence 'the new technology in scholarly communication is simply accelerating processes, reducing labour costs so as to keep up with inflation in the costs of paper, film, ink and binding

materials. It is letting us run faster so that we can stay more or less where we are. It has brought with it no explosion in distribution or readership...’ However, there was some acceptance of the advantages of the new technologies in providing the potential for more cost-efficient small-scale operations. Copy-editing and production are seen as two stages in which the new technologies could make an impact.

In the end, however, there are some consensus. The heart of academic publishing is human decision-making — appraising the quality of the manuscript and marketing it. It was also recognised that unequal resources could lead to unequal access thus putting some academics at a disadvantage. What was important was that the fragile structure of international scholarship needed to be strengthened; thus new technologies promised both risk and opportunity. Such sentiments at the end of the Seminar echoed what was eloquently stated at the beginning in the keynote address.

‘Civilizations rest on knowledge, held in great libraries, in universities, kept alive and vigorous through the constant impulse to test, modify, re-arrange and expand on the familiar, the known and are thus kept sharp and mobile. Knowledge is shifted, accumulated and transmitted in response to the whole range of social, economic, political and cultural challenges that mark life in the 20th Century. Academic publishing is a major conduit.’