

# Blurring Lines — The Chapter, Not the Book, as the Unit of Discovery: An Interview with Laura Brown of JSTOR

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**B**ook publishers of all genres: textbook, professional/trade/reference and scholarly have all struggled with innovating in packaging, pricing and distribution. The most forward-looking have emphasized multi-channel and multi-partner digital distribution with strategic attention to preserving pricing power with restricted channel access to their very best sellers and taking different approaches to front-list/back-list and top-sellers versus lower-sellers in terms of available sales models. But, in truth, the majority of book publishers simply pursue a “spray and pray” strategy and hope that the digital revenue line increases sufficiently year-over-year as measured against key competitors.

The book has long been treated as a linear experience/device beginning on page one and ending on page x, all with the assumption the reader finds utility in this “technology.” Popular press titles certainly demand this approach (whether print or digital) but books used in the academy by students and researchers are rarely consumed cover to cover. Digital textbooks link key terms in the chapter glossary to the line item entry within the text. Scholarly monographs or collections of contributed works facilitate via the table-of-contents quick links to the chapter of interest. And keyword searching within will take the reader to any relevant section they desire. With all this facility to drill down to chapters, sections, sentences within sections, etc. one would have expected more aggressive publisher uptake on product and business models that are increasingly granular. In my own experience with **Business Expert Press**, we forged a partnership with **Harvard Business Publishing’s** case program to align selected chapters from our books with selected **Harvard** cases; it was a very successful partnership.

Recently, I had the good fortune to finally meet, face-to-face, **Laura Brown**, Managing Director of **JSTOR**. As two former book publishers now working in the content aggregation and discovery space, our conversation quickly turned to the challenge of discovery and use eBooks face as compared to journal articles. **Laura** shared with me a recent simple but effective innovation undertaken by **JSTOR** to align eBook chapters in search and discovery with journal articles; in effect, disaggregating the book from its linear presentation of page one to page x. This conversation prompted the following interview:

**Laura, was there a “light bulb” moment that prompted the JSTOR team to pursue chapter-level discovery?**

We were convinced from the outset that including books alongside journals on the **JSTOR** platform would be of tremendous value for researchers and students. Because we

are such a heavily trafficked global platform, with over 40% of our users beginning their research on **JSTOR** (rather than beginning on **Google** or elsewhere and then following a link to **JSTOR**), we believed that by bringing books into the digital workflow, we could help to make centuries of long form scholarship more discoverable and useful.

At launch, we had decided the best path to discovery was through preserving the integrity of the whole book as a research object, and so we showed books alongside articles in search results. Over time, our data began to show that while users were clicking on tables of content at the rate we expected, they were not moving through to the chapter level. At the same time, our user experience research group had begun exploring the barriers to students including books in their research workflow. Two key findings emerged. 1) Many students held a mental model that books are physical things and that they would need to go to a physical place (library) to obtain one. They didn’t bother to click beyond the table of contents because their experience led them to believe that they would not get the text. 2) Books are long and it would take too much time/effort for them to find the portion of a book that is relevant for them.

This research led us to change our thinking. We began a/b testing chapters instead of books in our search results, and saw amazing improvements. Not only was there genuine excitement when students found highly relevant chapter content they could read and use immediately, but book usage showed a considerable spike. Based on these experiments, we decided to reengineer our user experience to make chapters the default search result.

**Why do you think book publishers, in general, are slow to innovate in packaging, pricing and distribution schemes?**

I think presses *have* been experimenting in many of these areas. They are publishing short works, making chapters available as marketing tools, launching new open access books programs such as **UC Press’s Luminos**, and even, in the case of **MIT Press**, offering online subscription products such as **CogNet** that include books and journals. One problem, though, is that many scholarly publishers aren’t big enough to have the resources to experiment with digital products beyond journals, and in many cases this experimentation can lead to the sort of disruptions that threaten their core print business for books. As a technology partner

for both presses and libraries, and a trusted platform for users, it is our goal to help build the value proposition for digital books in such a way that all sides benefit. We are collecting data and sharing it with our publisher and library partners so that this innovation can play out in an evidence-based way, and not as a leap of faith.

**How long has your chapter-level discovery program been in place and how has this impacted your ebook DDA program?**

The chapter-level approach to discovery has been in place for 18 months. From the outset it showed immediate results in terms of driving discovery, but as we have added more titles to the DDA corpus, and more participating institutions, we are seeing an enormous rate of growth in books usage. For instance, just in the first two months of 2016, even before the semester really gears up, we are already at 40% of the total usage we saw last year — a much larger increase than we would have expected for the program, even given the number of new titles and the number of new participants. Libraries appreciate that they pay only for the books their patrons need and use, and most participating publishers are seeing year-over-year growth in the revenue that they receive from **JSTOR** (especially for backlist titles). These trends support our original hypothesis that, as was the case with the back issues of journals in **JSTOR**, there is great potential to unlock new value for monographs in a digital environment.

**Please describe the basics of your eBook DDA program.**

Most of our titles are available in both a firm upfront licensing option (“pick and mix”) and a demand-driven acquisition (DDA) option. Libraries can shape their DDA corpus to meet their disciplinary priorities and budget constraints, and we help them to do that based on usage stats from their participation in our journals Archive. Most libraries choose to give their users access to the entire books corpus. We allow a fair number of usage events — chapter downloads and views — before a book purchase is triggered in the DDA option. Libraries maintain deposit accounts with us from which triggered purchases are deducted, and they replenish them according to usage patterns. We provide weekly stats to them of usage activity, triggered purchases, and the status of their deposit account.

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***Do you anticipate going even more granular? Can you envision a day when JSTOR is selling access to sentences, words?***

Now that we are seeing such promising results from one experiment to get readers to the information they value quickly, I think there are vast opportunities for innovation on both the navigational and business model fronts to help scholarly books thrive in a digital transition. The value of content in the digital environment is at least partly a function of how convenient it is to access as well as how convenient (or easy) it is to acquire or purchase. If you make content easy to find and purchase, much more of it will be used, and by many more users than ever before.

A bit of background on the navigation question: In a similar vein to the research we undertook with students, a survey of scholars about their research practices from my colleagues at Ithaka S+R revealed an interesting dichotomy in use cases for books. The study found that scholars tended to prefer eBooks over print books for basic research tasks, such as exploring references or searching for specific topics, but when it came to immersive reading, scholars preferred print books. A scholar might use an eBook as a sort of quick finding aid before turning to a print copy of the same title to read and digest the argument.

(The S+R study is available here: <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/blog-individual/stop-presses-monograph-headed-toward-e-only-future>.) So, speaking in the most reductive way, there's a "grab and go," goal-oriented mode of reading books, and then there's a more immersive, cover-to-cover reading experience. Right now, eBooks aren't doing a fantastic job for either reading case. For the goal-oriented reader, the simple act of flipping through a printed codex can be transformed into a frustrating series of clicks and toggling between different PDF files; for the immersed reader, the eBook may lack functionality — such as the ability to annotate — that we take for granted with print books.

Can we do a better job of satisfying both needs? Can we design and prototype new means of navigating books — whether it's a topic modeling approach that makes browsing a book by granular subject terms much easier to carry out, or an improved visualization of the place of any given book in the citation network of books and journals, or some other innovation — in a way that doesn't rob the reader of the opportunity to engage with the long form argument that plays out in linear fashion from chapter to chapter? And of course, there's a concomitant challenge: can we design user interface improvements that are scalable and affordable to implement across the many publishers and tens of thousands of books that a platform like **JSTOR** hosts? Those are big challenges, but I see

a real payoff for authors, publishers, and librarians: improving the navigability of digital books in a way that makes both reading "use cases" easier, more efficient, and more appealing to all levels of readers, including undergraduate students. And that's one area in which I'm hoping that **JSTOR** can make some valuable contributions to the community over the next several years.

I am also convinced that there is room for experimentation in business models. After all, DDA itself is one such new development that, in making scholarly books accessible to millions of potential readers, and demonstrating that value to libraries, offers real potential to revitalize scholarly monograph publishing. Whether the chapter will eventually be an alternative "unit of sale," or something even more granular, is hard to predict. What I am convinced of is that the value proposition for books, driven by new forms of discovery and a groundswell of online usage, is good news for publishers and libraries alike. Rather than hold on to old expectations and models, we'll all need to work together to find the right models to bring more books to more users in sustainable ways. 🌱