Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

THE PARK COMMITTEE REPORT: A HEFTY BLOW BESIDE THE NAIL[1]

Although the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council is to be applauded for establishing a Committee to address the difficulties posed by the funding of scholarly communication, an examination of the resulting report convinces us that the recommendations it proposes are very troubling indeed.

Our concerns are with both the explicit content of the report and with some key assumptions which it makes. The concerns are strong enough to lead us to conclude that Council would be ill-advised to adopt the recommendations of the report. In saying this, we recognize that in one respect we are too late – the foreword (p. viii) makes it clear that Council has already adopted the new goals which the report proposes. This worries us, not only because in our view there is at least one serious question to be raised about those goals, but because their adoption seems to give the lie to assertions elsewhere in the document that consultation with interested parties is seen as an important feature of change.

In what follows we address the explicit content of the report by focussing on the proposed goals and the proposed reallocation of funds. We address what to us are problematic assumptions by examining what the report calls "a single program of assistance" and questioning both whether it is in fact single, and whether it is the only appropriate seed bed for the application of the new technologies so urgently advocated.

New Goals

At first glance, the statement of key goals seems something to which no exception can be taken:

i) The Council recognizes the importance of scholarly communication as an integral part of the research process – it is therefore an activity which the Council will continue to support under the terms of its mandate.

ii) In supporting scholarly communication, the Council defines the following as its specific goals:

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1. This paper is a revised version of the response to the Park Committee report prepared by the authors for the Social Science Federation of Canada. The revisions owe much to dialogue engendered by the initial report.

- Wider and more rapid dissemination of materials embodying the results of research;
- Greater accessibility of such materials to users (in a given situation, users may constitute a broad or narrow segment of the population, and their level of specialization may be more or less advanced). (p. 4)

Examination of the way in which their translation into action is proposed, however, forces the recognition that two apparently innocuous elements in them become the legitimation for drastic changes in funding. These elements are the calls in goal (ii) for *breadth* and *speed* in the dissemination of reasearch results. While the meaning of breadth is defined in an appropriate way, the assertion that speed is to be encouraged is neither qualified nor justified.

This focus on speed of dissemination appears to have been adopted as a *sine qua non* of modern scholarly communication. In our view, however, there is good reason to question whether speed of dissemination is as important in the Social Sciences and the Humanities as it appears to be in the Medical and Natural Sciences. With some exceptions such as policy studies or technological impact studies, we are not generally producing technical results upon which the next stages of knowledge production are crucially and urgently dependent. Rather, much of what we produce calls for reflection and theory modification and permits the thoughtful unfolding of new research over a reasonable, but not hasty time span.

For this reason it is our view that the statement of goals may have been too uncritically adopted. Casualness in the adoption of these goals may lead to misguidedness in the allocation of funds.

Reallocation of Funds

We note that a basic and explicit assumption of the report is that "new" money will not be available to fund innovative projects, and that the reallocation of existing funds is therefore needed. The manner and degree of funding proposed for innovations, however, would, if fully implemented, seriously inhibit Council's achievement of its primary stated goal of continuing to support scholarly communication.

The report proposes that in 1982-83, just over 24% of the funds presently allotted to journals and manuscripts be reallocated to innovative projects. In 1983-84 this proportion is to increase to 50% (although it is impossible to determine how much of that will go to innovative projects *per se* because the category is expanded to include "supplementary assistance to books and journals where justified"). The size of these reallocations seems to us far too great from two points of view: that of what they will fund and that of what they will impoverish.

From the point of view of what might be funded, we would observe that an expenditure of $585,000 *in one year* for innovative projects would imply either a few projects of an incredibly luxurious quality, or a large number of less luxurious projects. We find the first possibility improper and the second highly

unlikely. It seems to us much more reasonable to assume that only a small number of proposals for such projects will emerge in 1982-83, and not a large number in 1983-84. The truth is, of course, that neither we nor the Joint Committee can predict what proposals will emerge, even in response to the kind of encouragement envisaged in the report. What in fact appears to have happened is that the Committee has not estimated the likely cost of innovative projects at all, but has simply appropriated what is left over from the budget for journals when all supplementary and non-committed grants have been removed. Furthermore, the potential audience for the innovative demonstrations proposed by the Committee seems to have been equally necromantically assumed. In a word, the amounts allocated for innovative projects are not based on the likely cost of such projects, but are purely arbitrary.

This reallocation also impoverishes existing programs in an equally arbitrary way. In this respect, however, the arbitrariness seems wantonly heedless of some features of those existing programs. Quite apart from the fact (acknowledged by the Committee) that a "basic production grant" is yet to be defined and is therefore as yet a meaningless phrase, the proposals appear to assume that the supplementary grants to journals are unnecessary frills. It seems to us, on the contrary, that the elements of journal production which they do fund are not only important for the journals' well being, but that at least two of them (office administration and editorial travel) are the kinds of activities which could facilitate a journal's serious consideration of the use of technological innovations. A proper understanding by the Committee of the purposes of supplementary grants might have led to the more useful recommendation that innovative projects be designated as a fourth category of supplementary funding (either as an addition to the existing three or as an optional replacement for one or more of them).

The impoverishment of the support for book-length scholarly manuscripts proposed for 1983-84 is far too great to be justified simply by the assertion that "the figure of $600,000 is a global estimate of the sum required". The effect of this 40% reduction would be to change the existing program entirely. It would not simply reduce the number of manuscripts which could be supported, it would mean that works no longer have to meet only the criterion of judged scholarly merit but would also have to compete. Competition could increase the administrative costs of the program, could result in the imposition of criteria which might work to the disadvantage of new and emerging disciplines and subfields, and would delay the awarding of subsidies considerably by requiring the establishment of competition dates. Such changes would, in our view, be very deleterious to the quality of a program which, by the Committee's own admission, appears to be satisfactory.

The "Single Program" — E Pluribus Unum?

Some of our comments will already have suggested that we find the credibility of the report wanting. It is too little supported by data and it shows an inadequate

match between its recommendations and some of the conclusions which precede them.[2] What is most troublesome, however, is the notion of Council's adopting a "single program of assistance to scholarly communication" (p. 4, Goals & Means, iii). Our concerns here are of three kinds. First, we question whether the proposed elements of the single program are similar enough to warrant administrative unification. Second, we note that some of the areas of Council's interest which would appear to be related to scholarly communication are omitted from the single program. Third, and perhaps most fundamental, we question the singling out of two particular aspects of scholarly communication as the testing ground for the application of the new technologies.

We do not find any apparent rationale in the report for the creation of a single program to replace those which presently exist under the Research Communications label. There are hazards in adopting a policy which covers with one blanket activities which are identifiably separate, even though they are also related. Journals, for example, perform a different function from books: they disseminate the results of what are often shorter term activities, they represent a different facet of scholarly life and they are generally used differently.

We also note that some features of the present funding of scholarly communication are excluded from the report. The Committee has by explicit decision, not considered the Major Editorial Projects Program which presently lies within the Research Grants Division and which in 1982-83 will receive more than twice the amount available for all journals and books. Nor has any reference been made to two programs which currently exist within Research Communications (Conference Grants and Aid to Canadian Learned Societies). In introducing a new category of fundable activity (innovations), the report seems to break ground which in some respects seems highly appropriate for inclusion in the Strategic Grants Program within the theme of the Human Context of Science and Technology. It is also noteworthy that a "single program", however defined, may fly in the face of trends both within Council and the research community to increase research output. This increased output needs to be communicated and that may not necessarily be done appropriately under the constraint of a single program. In short, the notion of the single program is neither justified nor comprehensively and convincingly worked out.

Perhaps the chief reason for the proposal's being unconvincing lies in its restriction to the twin programs of aid to scholarly journals and aid to manuscript publication. In section II of the report we find the following:

> The committee, while continuing to look on books and journals
> as two important means of scholarly communication existing
> *within a wide range of possible media,* should devise a new
> program which will stimulate the exploration and use of a
> *diversity of modes appropriate to a wide range of communi-
> cation activities.* (emphasis supplied)

With these sentiments there can surely be little quarrel. The problem is that the report, while proposing (usefully in our view) the organization of demonstra-

tions of new technology, proposes at the same time to fund them exclusively with funds taken from the learned journals budget in 1982-83 and from the budgets of learned journals and scholarly manuscripts in 1983-84. It would not, then, be surprising for journal editors, authors and book publishers to cry, "Why take only from us?" Such a cry might well be dismissed with the retort that these people are simply protecting their vested interests and that what they produce is doomed to extinction anyway. But there is no evidence as yet that this is so. Journal editors have not stopped seeing a unique role for their work and authors and publishers are not yet questioning the viability of the book as medium. They may in time come to do so. But when they do it will be because other media have come to be recognized as superior for the purposes of scholarly communication.

It is here that we come to the heart of the problem posed by the report. It seems to assume that the new media can quickly replace a large part of what journals and books do. Might they not be assumed rather to add to our existing choice of media over a time frame which permits adequate re-education and assessment? Such an assumption requires, of course, that adequate funds be available, and Council's dilemma arises from its conviction that they are not. But must Council stand alone in funding these necessary ventures? Other agencies have much greater knowledge of the new technology than has Council. Council knows more than they do about the sorts of applications which will be useful to scholars. Is not the pursuit of joint programs with, for example, the Department of Communications, a feasible option?

In Conclusion

This last suggestion notwithstanding, our critique of the Joint Committee's report will seem to some to lack a constructive note. Perhaps that is because the report itself is less than constructive in its proposals for funding innovations at the expense of established programs. What the report has achieved, however, is a clear recognition of Council's problems in funding scholarly communication, and the stimulation of thought about the problem.

We continue to believe that journals and books are needed. We agree with the notion of their editors and publishers being encouraged to think seriously of new modes of production, perhaps by the creation of an appropriate new category of the supplementary grants now in existence. One question, however, seems

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2. For example, the report concludes that technological applications pose problems and do not permit dogmatic assertions as to their benefits (p. 3). And yet its recommendations assume the appropriateness of technological change to a degree which remains to be verified. As a second example, the report recognizes (p. 15) the need for policies which will minimize the difficulties inherent in making comparative judgements about diverse work, and yet increases the need for such judgements both directly (by calling for adjudications about "special justifications") and indirectly (by reducing the level of manuscript support to the point where judgements of individual merit must be followed by judgements of comparative worth).

crucial: for what kinds of scholarly communication are the new media most appropriate?

The recent Report No. 33 of the Science Council of Canada advocates the establishment of a national research institute for the development of advanced computer systems and applications software.[3] Perhaps the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council should not be trying to stand alone in its attempt to bring the new technologies into the scholarly milieu. Alone, it can only re-shuffle arbitrarily the money it has available and antagonize thereby a sizeable segment of its community. As a partner in a national institute it could bring its own point of view to the community of communications specialists and could acquire the understanding needed for the cooperative funding of projects which would explore the most appropriate ways of using the new technologies in the service of the Social Sciences and the Humanities.

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3. Science Council of Canada. Report No. 33, *Planning Now for an Information Society: Tomorrow Is Too Late.* Ottawa, March, 1982.

Aid to Scholarly Communication. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and Advisory Academic Panel joint committee report. Chairperson: Paul Park S.S.H.R.C. Ottawa (1982)

The two basic problems which are addressed in this report are those resulting from the rising costs of scholarly journal production and distribution, and those related to the inaccessibility of papers in specialized journals to the wider profes-sional public which should be making use of them. In 1981 the council redefined its goals in supporting scholarly communication to be:

1. "Wider and more rapid dissemination of materials embodying the results of research"
2. "Greater accessibility of such materials to users"

With these goals in mind the council is currently reviewing its support to existing publications and will announce the results of its review in "1982-83".

The Park report is concerned with adding new initiatives to the existing modalities of scholarly communication to help solve the basic problems and achieve the stated goals.