

Slow Publishing

By Fernando Q. Gouvêa



On Books

“Fast food” is one of those American inventions that have spread throughout the world because they are such good ideas. When you’re on break and need to get back to work quickly, or are in a strange city, or don’t have much money, it can be great to get cheap, reliable, and clean food. It won’t necessarily be good, but you know it will be edible.

Like all great ideas, however, it can be pushed too far. Many of us long for food made slowly, carefully, using local ingredients, by folks whose goal is great quality and taste, not efficiency or huge profits.. So a “slow food” movement was born.

Like everything else, publishing has become faster. It’s now possible to bypass a publisher entirely and produce your own book: As soon as you’ve finished writing, it can be put up on the Internet. Even the more traditional publishers, be they commercial, academic, or professional societies, seem to be trying to make the trip from manuscript to print go faster.

One big consideration, of course, is cost. Fast food tends to be much less expensive than slow food, because care and attention require trained people, which is expensive. It’s true in publishing, too, as the example of copyediting shows.

In the olden days, once a manuscript was ready for publication, it was handed to a copyeditor. This person’s job was to read the manuscript line by line, checking for grammatical errors, missing punctuation, inconsistent formatting, typos, and all other minor blemishes that wouldn’t necessarily make the text impossible to understand but might annoy the reader. My experience as a reader suggests that

copyediting is not often done today. I suppose it is partly because more and more authors are turning in manuscripts that they have formatted and typeset themselves, but the other big factor is that good copyediting is expensive, especially if you need someone with special training, as would be the case in mathematics.



Discarding specialists in other areas is taking place, too, such as layout and production. This used to be the job of book designers whose focus was on making beautiful books, but more and more design seems to be driven by cost rather than aesthetics. My pet peeve in this direction is long lines and tight margins. You’d think mathematicians, of all people, would understand that narrow margins (in which proofs do not fit) are a bad thing!

Editors are even more important as guides to the nature and conception of the book you are writing. When I was writing *Math through the Ages* with Bill Berlinghoff, I was constantly grateful to have a coauthor. If I got carried away by some neat thing and started to go on a tangent, Bill was always there to tell me, “You’ve forgotten what kind of book you are writing.” And I did the same for him. The book became much better as a result. Most books have a single author, however, and an editor has to do that job. Most publishers still do this, but I suspect many authors have not really learned to appreciate how useful and

important it is.

As you may guess, my heroes are the publishers who still do it slowly. The MAA is a shining example: MAA books are still edited in large and small ways. MAA editorial boards make suggestions, find mistakes, request changes. I’m currently finishing a book that went through several cycles of this. Once the editorial board was happy with the book, it was sent to a copyeditor, at which point several more mistakes were found. The process has been slow, but in the end, the result will be a better book.

As I mentioned in my August/September column, the slowest of the slow has been the Carus Mathematical Monographs series, which has averaged two or three books per decade over its almost eighty years (maa.org/ebooks/carus.html). So perhaps you won’t be surprised to hear that I have accepted an invitation to become editor of that series. I do want to pick up the pace a bit, but very much staying within the tradition of careful, systematic, detailed editing.

Who should write a Carus? Well, if you want your precious words left untouched and you object to editors who edit, you certainly should stay away. But if you have a good idea for a book at the advanced undergraduate or early graduate level and feel that you can use all the help you can get, you should give us a try. Maybe with the assistance of MAA members and authors we can produce a new one every two years. Five per decade . . . amazing! 🍷

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