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Altmetric for Books: Informing commissioning and data-driven decisions

Welzenbach, Rebecca; Demers, Elizabeth

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Hi, my name is Rebecca Welzenbach. I'm the Research Impact Librarian at the University of Michigan and prior to this position, which I've been in for just over a year, I worked for 8 years in our publishing division on a range of open access journal and monographs projects, as well as on new initiatives such as our pilot with Altmetric for Publishers pilot, which initially ran from 2015-2017 (we're still using the tool today through an institution-wide license). Today I'll offer Michigan Publishing as a case study, discussing what we've learned in the last 3-4 years about how Altmetric data does (and doesn't) support our editors in making data-driven decisions about acquisitions and editorial strategy.

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Before I go any further, I also want to acknowledge my colleague, Elizabeth Demers, senior acquiring editor for political and social science at the University of Michigan Press. Elizabeth couldn't be here to present with me today, but she and I developed this material together and, as an acquiring editor, she is in the position to actually be engaging with this data to make decisions, whereas I am at a bit more of an observer or lurker in this process.

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For today's webinar, we were invited to focus on how Altmetric data for books can be used by editorial teams to make data-driven decisions, and particularly to think about how Altmetric data can reveal emerging trends and new areas of interest. This prompt actually provided an interesting challenge for us: thus far, a lot of our engagement with Altmetric data and reports has been pretty closely tied to marketing and promotion--what kind of buzz are we getting, where is it worthwhile to expend marketing efforts, etc. So this was a good opportunity to pause and think a bit differently about how having Altmetric data available to us for a number of years now is starting to impact our editorial and acquisitions work.

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First let me say a bit about how acquisitions editors typically have tracked engagement with their books. Historically, sales data is of course of vital importance, and typically the primary metric for success. In addition to this, editors are looking for strong reviews in prominent places, awards from relevant scholarly societies and, more recently, usage data from ebook aggregator platforms such as Project Muse, JSTOR, and EBSCO. Altmetric data is another tool that editors have been able to add to their toolbox to determine which books have been the most successful.

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Of course, an editor's most important work of all is anticipating what--and who--is going to be important soon. Establishing a series or list in an emerging area before everyone else does, or signing a scholar for their first book anticipating their future success--this is the real art and magic in the work. How does it happen now? By participating in the discipline, especially by being at conferences, attending panels, hearing early versions of work, offering consultations at the press's booth in the exhibit hall. There are other ways to meet folks and keep up with what's new in the discipline, but nothing seems to beat carefully developed personal relationships, strong intuition and being attuned to new directions, and active engagement with people and with their work.

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So, How might the addition of access to Altmetric data support the work of an acquiring editor?

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So far, we find that--unlike when using Altmetric to assess marketing efforts--a very direct approach to engaging with Altmetric data for new books does not help to inform acquisitions strategy. Imagine we publish a book, we follow the Altmetric data for that book (or for set of related book), and rely on that data to justify future decision-making. For marketing, this

makes sense--we want to track what exactly we did to promote this title, what kind of engagement resulted, and then use that to make decisions for the next comparable book. But it just doesn't work that way for acquisitions.

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The main reason for this is, simply put, TIME.

One of the key promises of Altmetrics is that we can gain insight into how a work is performing much more quickly than we could when we had to wait for citations to build up over the course of years. And for journal articles there is some evidence that articles with high altmetric engagement will indeed go on to be more highly cited than those without.

With books, though, there are still some major limitations to do with time that Altmetric can't get around. We've found that books still take a long time--more than a year, at least--to start accumulating even a moderate amount of meaningful, varied engagement--by which I mean, more than just a tweet or two. Moreover, Books take a long time to acquire and publish.

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Let's look at something a little more concrete. This is a portion of a view from the Altmetric Explorer dashboard. I have called up all Michigan Publishing books, and sorted them from most recently published on down. I'm only able to show a small section of the results list here, but what you can see is that we have to go back to December 2017 to start seeing any number of books with substantial engagement (and, frankly, even this amount of engagement is not actually that much, if you drill into it). With few exceptions, everything published more recently than December 2017 has just a tiny bit of Twitter chatter and pretty much nothing else. So, let's take these December 2017 titles. Let's imagine the engagement with them reveals something really telling about an emerging trend that our editors want to pursue. Well, it's taken more than a year to acquire this information, and it will take (at minimum) another year or, more likely, at least two, to

identify, sign, and ultimately publish that next imagined book. In other words, from book to book is too long of a cycle for trend tracking. In political science, in particular, what's hot and generating Altmetric data RIGHT NOW due to its timeliness, actually wouldn't necessarily be relevant in 2-3 years. If another book is already getting a lot of traction on a timeley topic, it's too late to acquire a book on that subject right now. In other words, to stay on top of trends and emerging areas of interest, editors need to be looking to conversations happening beyond and between books--not focusing on books alone. We'll come back to this shortly.

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Actually, it's a bit of a surprise, but in fact where Altmetric data has been most valuable for our acquisitions team so far has been in highlighting which books (and which topics) are effectively timeless--older books that are still a part of the scholarly conversation. We've been really pleasantly surprised to see what Altmetric data can tell us about the richness of our deep backlist!

Here, the bit of altmetric data that is most exciting and interesting to our acquisitions editors is the data from the Open Syllabus Project, which lets us know which books have been widelty adopted for classroom use. Of course some of these adoptions we know about already. But some have been quite revleaing!

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Here's another view from the Altmetric Explorer. In this case I have pulled up all Michigan Publishing books, and sorted them by syllabus mentions. There are a few really interesting observations here. First, the age of the books: A lot from the 90s. A few from the 80s, a good number from the early Aughts. Here's one from the 60s! The other thing I want to point out is the number of titles that appear on many syllabi, but have no other engagement of any kind. These are books that are easy for us to miss, or just not think about consistently--but when we see that they're actively in use in classrooms, and the book is 20+ years old, it can trigger us to ask

whether it's time for an updated edition, or for a new study in that field for that matter. Again, simply due to how long it takes to move from observing something, making a decision, and following through on acquiring and publishing a book, I don't at this time have new acquisitions I can say were directly influenced by this information. We're just not there yet. But I can say that while we've always known *Simulacra and Simulation* was a hugely popular text, we had, by contrast, not paid much attention to *Bad Boys*--and now we are.

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I've talked about what doesn't really work and about what does--but I'd like to say a word as well about where I see real potential that we just haven't fully explored yet. So far, I have been talking about tracking our own publications, monitoring engagement with them, and drawing conclusions from that. What we have not (yet) really explored is using the Altmetric Explorer in the same way that editors use academic conferences: to explore BEYOND AND BETWEEN our books--looking at other types of publication, from other publishers--to see what conversations (and which authors) are getting a lot of traction.

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Here, for example, is a very rough search of the whole Altmetric database for recent publications matching the keyword term "political science." Just as we might expect, the results are lots and lots of journal articles, in publications that are not ours. But by investigating these, we can start to see emergent themes that lead to high engagement, particularly those to do with partisanship and polarization, and with politics and gender. Elizabeth would have been able to do a much more nuanced search here to get at what's most interesting to her -- again, this is just a very rough first search to demonstrate what's possible. I think the Explorer tool has a lot of potential in this way that we haven't fully taken advantage of yet--but I'd like to try.

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As I wrap up my time here, I just wanted to mention that I saw mention earlier this week of a report coming out on the joint pilot between Altmetric and the Association of University presses. A handful of presses tested out Altmetric and have summarized their experiences here. Michigan was not part of the pilot--because we were already using Altmetric--but the major recommendations aligned with my experience--so if you want to know more about Altmetrics and books, I encourage you to check that out.

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So, to conclude:

- **Books are still slow.** Even though Altmetric data can accumulate more quickly than citations, meaningful data accumulates too slowly, and books take too long to publish, for engagement with any given title to inform the next strategic acquisitions decision.
- **Altmetric data can signal timelessness/endurance.** Altmetric data, amazingly, tells us a lot about ongoing use of and engagement with deep backlist titles that perhaps we ought to pay some attention to!
- **There's value to be mined well beyond data about the books you publish.** There is likely potential to use the Altmetric Explorer to supplement what acquisitions editors already do to track emerging trends and scholars. But we haven't really tried this yet.

