

Michael Furlough

University presses and scholarly communication

Potential for collaboration

*“Most of the presses will die. They’ve clung to the past; they’re too traditional; they’re too afraid of big competitors.”—Anonymous librarian, quoted in *University Publishing in a Digital Age**

When have university presses not been on the brink of disaster? Historians in the community recall golden days in the 1960s, but it’s hard to tell if those were really boom times or if they were just slightly less difficult than the decades that have followed. Clearly, for the last decade their future has been worried over, questioned, and outright dismissed, as the above librarian suggests. It’s a safe bet that the anonymous librarian quoted above thinks his or her own library exemplifies opposing characteristics: thriving, forward-thinking, innovative, and bold.

University presses may not be cowering in the basement, but they are scrambling for the bandwidth that would allow them to change. Still, while libraries’ campus-based roles require us to cast our net more broadly than many university presses, we haven’t solved the “crisis in scholarly communication” either.

Open access

The library community’s understandable and necessary focus on scientific, technical, and medical (STM) publishers, copyright, and open access has generated alarm from university presses, as the Association of American University Presses’ (AAUP) Statement on open access suggests: “plunging straight into pure open access, as attractive as it may sound in theory, runs the serious risk of destabilizing scholarly communications in ways that would

disrupt the progress of scholarship and the advancement of knowledge.”¹

Interpreted by some as a sign of AAUP’s resistance to an inevitable future, this document might be more fruitfully read for guidance on how open access could be expanded into disciplines and formats other than the sciences and journals. Readers will find the university press community’s primary concern to be with solvency (e.g., whether open access would undermine Project Muse, whose journal publishing revenue floats the monograph programs at some university presses).

But readers will also find some willingness among university presses to consider ways in which revenue-generating activities might actually help open access programs: “AAUP believes it is important to keep an open mind about what constitutes open access, since some kinds of open access are compatible with a market-based model. . . . For university presses, unlike commercial and society publishers, open access does not necessarily pose a threat to their operation and their pursuit of the mission to ‘advance knowledge, and to diffuse it . . . far and wide.’”²

This statement echoes John Willinsky in *The Access Principle*, where he writes “to

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dispel the idea that greater access to the knowledge represented by scholarly publishing is an all or nothing proposition. The term *open access* may suggest that, like a door, a journal is open or it is not. The still-emerging realities of opening access to this literature are otherwise.”³

STM publishing practices and dynamics have caused significant collateral damage to the monograph programs of university presses. The Ithaka report, “University Publishing in a Digital Age,” shifts the conversation to a wider range of pressures and ways to prevent further damage. Authors Laura Brown, Rebecca Griffiths, and Matthew Rascoff assess the current health of university presses and prescribe a look inward, rather than outward, to align university presses more directly with the strengths and strategic goals of their host universities.

As Brown put it in an opening plenary at the AAUP annual meeting in Minneapolis in June: “Ask: How do I solve my university’s problems. . . . No business flourishes when its owners don’t care about it.”⁴ This is easy advice if a press primarily serves its local campus community, but presses generally serve scholarship at large. Thus a majority of its funding comes from revenue generated from outside of its host institutions, and its authors primarily come from the outside, as well. Only a few more than 100 university presses exist at more than 1,000 master’s-level colleges and universities in North America. With this ratio, presses have become more distanced from their hosts, and arguably less crucial to their mission. Meanwhile, some research libraries, such as Ohio State, North Carolina State, Indiana, and others, including my own, have begun to address the publishing needs of their campuses through new services.

University presses are crucial

Libraries should care about the health of university presses because publishers and publishing-related services are crucial to libraries’ own future. Many librarians now help students and faculty use digital content and

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technologies in their research and teaching, and we are supporting them in elaborating new and transformative uses of these materials. Increasingly we support more parts of the entire process of scholarship, and, especially in newer media, we are expanding our services to the process of authoring and creation, and then linking that to the process of presentation and archiving. Libraries have invested significantly in technology platforms to manage, provide access to, and (in time) preserve large digital collections. But presentation means dissemination, not publishing of research, and librarians need to understand the scope of both to support scholarly communication more effectively.

Our principles of selection—for the materials we buy or license, or those we choose to digitize locally—are based on service to our local faculty and students, not on the same editorial principles that guide publishers. We think of our clients as “users” or “customers” rather than as “producers” and “authors,” but the latter identities are more important to our clients in establishing their career path. Our attempts to collect their research in institutional repositories could perhaps be more successful if we think of their needs as scholars and producers of research, not just users of our reference and archiving services.

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Collaboration between and among university presses and libraries can enhance the service mission of these organizations. A number of university presses now report to libraries, and many others report to the same senior administrative office as the library. Only a few examples of collaboration between presses and libraries can be readily identified, but some promising conversations have begun.

In June 2007, California Digital Library (CDL), the University of Michigan Library, and SPARC sponsored “New Structures, New Texts: A Summit on the Library and the Press as Partners in the Enterprise of Scholarly Publishing.”⁵

Much of the day was spent sharing initial efforts. CDL and University of California (UC) Press discussed their joint investigation of opportunities for shared services across the UC System, which has included traveling to all of the UC campuses together. Utah outlined their own investigation into the digital publishing needs of their institution, and highlighted the challenges for a smaller press attempting to step into this arena. Virginia’s press presented their experience in adopting and publishing a scholarly project incubated in the library. Michigan and Penn State discussed their efforts to collaborate across boundaries between the library and the press on publishing open access monographs.

The summit helped to begin dialogue around the relationship of publishing to the research enterprise, the development of new forms of scholarship, and the requisite organizational and economic structures.

Catherine Mitchell, CDL publishing services manager, explains that they are exploring ways of supporting “publishing projects that really lend themselves to a hybrid

model—most specifically, interdisciplinary work that bridges worlds with quite distinct publishing practices, publishing programs in emerging fields, and those scholarly projects with complex technical requirements for publication.”⁶

Some publishers—including some attendees at this summit—remain uncertain. “I’m not sure what question we are trying to answer together,” said one to me privately, while another expressed skepticism that a collaborative publishing endeavor would gain much financial support from senior administrators, based on his experience with his university’s president. But for Mitchell, both the summit and the recent discussions sparked by the Ithaka report reinforce the need to respond to “the kind of scholarly work that finds an uncomfortable home within the traditional structures of the scholarly publishing world.”⁷

Both libraries and university presses are losing a large part of the authority that they have held as arbiters of quality and channels for content access as those roles have begun migrating to other agents. So what is to be done? The Ithaka report prescribes, among other things, increasing the capacity to scale academic publishing, including the development of “a powerful technology, service and marketing platform that would serve as a catalyst for collaboration and shared capital investment in university-based publishing.”⁸

Ithaka President Kevin Guthrie, in his introduction to the report, makes it clear that JSTOR believes itself to be a potential developer of such a platform. Interestingly, many librarians and publishers have responded coldly to Guthrie’s comment, perhaps because of our recent histories with conglomerates that have cornered certain markets in academic publishing.

But the Ithaka report also promotes institutional collaboration, and includes an appendix outlining the complementary strengths and weaknesses of libraries and university presses relative to the business, service, and technology aspects of content creation and delivery. You might characterize

it as a matchmaker's checklist, or as the first half of a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. If libraries and university presses collaborate to support services, programs, and products on their campuses, they should complete this analysis to assess both the opportunities and threats in those collaborations.

Libraries and publishers sharing risk

Collaborations require compromise and the loss of complete control, which may raise anxieties about identity loss, autonomy, and mission creep. For libraries and publishers such anxieties will surface over the content itself. For university presses, controlling access to content is crucial—required to focus on their bottom line, they often have different perspectives from libraries on matters of copyright, electronic reserves, and Google's libraries project. To work together, both librarians and publishers will have to compromise on intellectual property and access controls, and reflect on how the positions are tied to their mission and values. Can you really protect your investment without owning copyright? Can you really give the content away and still sell some copies?

A university press's imprint and brand identity confers the authority of peer approval for scholars and their promoting and tenure committees. Editorial and marketing staff will be concerned with protecting their brand from dilution, especially when collaborating on a project that bypasses a process of peer review. Similarly librarians may worry that any efforts to limit access to their content and commodify it may undermine the goal of broad and unlimited, if not open, access. But it is worth remembering that neither party is pure: university presses have readily entered the nonscholarly regional and trade markets, and libraries have allowed the likes of ProQuest and Alexander Street Press into their archives for years.

The real opportunity in collaborations between presses and libraries lies in sharing risk and leveraging their wagers on the future of scholarship in the academy. By linking

up the processes of scholarly creation with access and stewardship, libraries have an opportunity to truly attend to the entire life cycle of scholarship.

Publishing consultant Joe Esposito has suggested that university presses have a chance to get back into scientific publishing by looking into the primary materials, rather than the secondary analyses, of research: the identification, management, marketing and distribution of primary data sets created in the pure and applied sciences.⁹ A surprising recommendation, especially when you consider that most libraries are only just beginning to investigate the question of how to manage and preserve such data ourselves.

The primary materials in our archives are the future datasets for humanists and social scientists, and our publishing colleagues can help us analyze our markets, think through our own principles of content selection, and identify opportunities for added value, especially when it comes to identifying and selecting the stuff that Google isn't planning to scan. It's easy to talk about what scholarship of the future might look like: dynamic, networked, immediately accessible, and quality-controlled through computational systems as well as human assessment. But we don't know all the small steps to get there, and we need more partners to help us do so—and not all of these partners should be found in our computing departments and IT organizations.

Conclusion

While I don't think that all university presses are ready to engage in this type of collaboration (and some never may be), our colleagues at university presses shouldn't be dismissed. Both of us are redefining ourselves, and we both need to refocus on all the core elements of scholarly creation and communication to understand the whole cycle more completely. We can't do that independently in libraries, and university presses bring value and needed expertise to our profession's attempt to assert new roles in relation to publishing. Information technology has given us great

opportunity to blur previously distinct roles, and it has given commercial publishers even greater leverage to control scholarly content and move it directly to the desktops of our faculty and students, potentially bypassing the library.

Hosting the publishing of a journal in our libraries may not lower journal costs overall, and open access will likely coexist with traditional commercial publishing *services* (not necessarily content) and business models that will continue to place stress on our collections budgets and challenge our principles of fair use and sharing among libraries. But this is an opportune moment for both librarians and publishers: we should exploit our common interests and complementary strengths to create a healthier ecosystem for our researchers' scholarly communication.

Notes

1. American Association of University Presses, "Statement on Open Access," (New York, NY: American Association of University Presses, 2007), 1.

2. Ibid. 3, 5.

3. John Willinsky, *The Access Principle: The Case for Open Access to Research and Scholarship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 28.

4. Laura Brown, and Joseph Esposito, "Plenary Address: Putting the University Back into the University Press," in 2007 AAUP Annual Meeting (Minneapolis, MN: 2007).

5. See the wiki for the event at acadpubsummit.pbwiki.com/.

6. Catherine Mitchell, E-mail, October 18, 2007.

7. Ibid.

8. Laura Brown, Rebecca Griffiths, and Matthew Rascoff, "University Publishing in a Digital Age," (New York, NY: Ithaka, 2007), 1, www.ithaka.org/strategic-services/Ithaka%20University%20Publishing%20Report.pdf.

9. Joseph J. Esposito, "The Wisdom of Oz: The Role of the University Press in Scholarly Communications," *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 10, no. 1 (2007), hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3336451.0010.103. *zn*

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