What Was a University Press?

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From A University Press — The Twenty-First Century University Press: Assessing the Past, Envisioning the Future

Column Editor’s Note: These two pieces were originally delivered as part of a plenary session at the 2012 Charleston Conference, and they are worth running in ATG because they eloquently highlight the evolution and current transformations of university press publishing. — LS

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Association of American University Presses, or the AAUP. Collaboration among university presses began as early as the 1920s, with discussions of a joint catalog, and an organized meeting in 1928 included representatives from Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Johns Hopkins, North Carolina, Duke, Chicago, Pennsylvania, Stanford, and Oxford. According to a recent history of the AAUP, at that meeting,

“Cooperation among university presses was born amongst the luxurious surroundings of the original Waldorf-Astoria. When the Hotel Pennsylvania and the Commodore proved too expensive, someone negotiated a rate of $6/single or $9/double at one of the world’s most famous hotels. The organizers were quite pleased. University of Pennsylvania Press director Phelps Soule confessed a long-held ambition to lunch someday at the Waldorf, as it looks very grand from the top of the Fifth Avenue Bus.”

I mention this to emphasize that the vast majority of modern university presses are nonprofit entities and have a long and illustrious history of thrift.

Fast forward to the year 2012, which finds university presses at a moment of scrutiny as the former makes the fulfillment of the latter — or are unable to meet the needs of — modern users. I have two immediate responses to this. First, I believe this happens, in part, because we as university presses haven’t always done a good job of explaining our value and promoting that message to our stakeholders, which include our campuses, libraries, scholarly societies, authors, administrators, and faculty. Truly connecting with your constituents is a very powerful thing and should be done at every possible opportunity. I was fortunate enough to recently spend an hour with one of the Mississippi university presidents, talking about our press’s work and exploring the many ways in which the press’s challenges were similar to the challenges he faced in formulating plans for the growth and success of his own campus. At the end of the meeting he said that the press should be getting more money to further fund our thriving program and allow us to make additional technological and infrastructure investments. You will not hear the words “I want to give you more money” very often on a campus these days, and I took this as a potent example of the importance of dialog and of finding commonalities with your stakeholders.

Second, I believe university presses are consistently labeled “in crisis” because we cannot predict exactly what scholarly communication or publishing (and there is an increasing difference between these two things) will look like in five years, or even two. University presses are in the very same boat as libraries, administrators of campus textbook and course management systems, faculty, and campus IT managers. We are firmly in the middle of a period of highly disruptive technological change. The issue is this: old systems no longer work well, there is a new system introduced every 3-6 months, and we simply have no way of guaranteeing that the systems in which we do choose to invest will be the ones that will still serve us well in two years. We are all well acquainted with the effects of this disruptive change, but it does not mean that university presses are inherently broken or irrelevant. It merely means that my crystal ball is just as foggy as yours, and we have to experiment, innovate, listen to our users and customers, and then ultimately make it up as we go along.

This is actually deeply reassuring to me. If the real issue were that no one cares about scholarly content, then university press directors and staff should be lying awake nights. The issue instead is that we are charged with finding new ways to fulfill our long-term mission of selecting, developing, editing, producing, marketing, and disseminating high-quality, peer-reviewed scholarship. We as presses can today learn a great deal from academic libraries about the new paths on which scholarship may travel. So I hope this conference, and the official AAUP-sponsored University Press Week that will run November 11-17 and that we’re kicking off here, will foster the greater mutual understanding and dialog that will help us find and navigate those future paths. Please take some time to visit www.universitypressweek.org and look at what university presses across the country are doing to connect with their places and their readers.

What Was a University Press?

by Doug Armato (Director, University of Minnesota Press)

I’m going to take this occasion of the Association of American University Presses’ 75th anniversary and of the 36th University Press Week to speak a little more personally than I usually would about our joint enterprise of university press publishing — its past, present, and potential futures.
being closed or threatened with closure: the press at Cornell ceased business just six years later, in 1884, only to be resuscitated in 1930. The first commercially-operating university press was founded at Johns Hopkins in 1878, a press that has remained at the leading edge of our profession, co-founding Project Muse in cooperation with its parent institution’s Milton S. Eisenhower Library in 1985 and, last year, joining with a broad consortium of university presses to add frontlist scholarly eBooks to its invaluable platform.

But while university presses have been a part of the North American academic and publishing landscape for over a century—and-a-half, the Association of American University Presses has its roots in 1928, when the directors of twelve presses met at New York’s Waldorf Astoria hotel to discuss joint marketing and sales initiatives — it is significant that they were already marketing and sales discussions. The Association itself was founded in 1937 — the anniversary we celebrate this year — with 22 members, my press among them. At the height of the Depression, university presses were being founded at a rate of about one each year, a rate which continued through to the 1970s, when the end of the Federal subsidies for university libraries under the Cold War Era National Defense Education Act began the long slide in library monograph purchases, the “Monograph Crisis,” that gained speed with the “Serials Crisis” of the 1980s and faces new challenges with the movement toward Open Access today. Arguably, then, university presses have been in some form of crisis since the late 1970s, some 35 years ago.

I started my career in university presses in the late 1970s, some 35 years ago. So, starting with me anyway, I have been in university presses, with a brief diversion into trade publishing, for almost half of the AAUP’s existence, from the apogee of the print age to the brink of what I believe will be a new digital golden age for university presses. When I started in university presses in 1978 at Columbia, over 70% of our book sales were to libraries, with the rest — to bookstores, to individuals, scholars, and graduate students for course use, and overseas — seen as “icing.” That “icing” now overwhelms the cake itself, with libraries accounting for only an estimated 20% to 25% of university press sales. (Here, a brief parenthesis to say that the consolidation of the book distribution chain over the past decade has made it much more difficult to establish fully accurate market statistics). Yet amid this career-long “crisis,” university presses have in fact held their own, with overall sales even increasing by about ten percent over the past, certainly to the credit and the strength of the university presses themselves. And, I’d argue, we’ve become more significant culturally and intellectually by paying more attention to the market — being as concerned with the needs of scholar-readers as scholar-writers.

So why be concerned on this 75th anniversary of the impressively resilient Association of American University Presses? One reason is that the current challenges of the digital environment and Open Access — of what I referred to above as a potential “new digital golden age for university presses” — require a renewed partnership with academic libraries in order to fully realize their promise for scholarship. The second is that academic libraries are struggling with their own budgetary and existential crises, as are the universities that support both libraries and presses. And the third is that library and press relations are increasingly showing signs of fraying, mimicking in several ways the political polarization — the lack of joint problem solving and reaching across the aisles — that besets American society as a whole. These are problems to solve not in the next 35 years of crisis, but in the next 3.5 years of crisis, for, as we all know, the economic landscape is shifting rapidly as are the needs of scholars and students and the expectations of university administrators.

II: Eden

I referred earlier to the inversion of the university press book sales from overwhelmingly library-driven three decades ago to overwhelmingly non-library driven today. Some have seen this as evidence of the university press mission’s having moved away from that of the university itself, or of the university presses themselves. Some have spoken of presses as turning away, like Eve and Adam, leaving Paradise from the purity of monographs toward “midlist trade books,” but any look at university press catalogs quickly reveals that those “midlist” trade books are overwhelmingly written by university faculty — they are, in fact, scholarly books, some of the best that we publish. And there is nothing new in this at all. In 1928, three years after my press’s founding, we published a book on healthy eating titled Prunes or Pancakes by the Dean of the School of Dentistry at Columbia University. A midlist trade title if there ever was one.

Nevertheless, Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s carefully-argued and thought-provoking NYU Press book, Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy has traced an earlier model of university publishing from the 1893 founding of the University of California Press to publish works by that institution’s own faculty, mostly pamphlets which she sees as proto-blogs, noting that model prevailed for forty years until about 1930 — a decade we’d recognize as that of the creation of the modern university press with the cooperative movement that would result in the formation of the AAUP. A widely-read library blogger extrapolated from Fitzpatrick’s account of the early decades of the UC Press that presses — he makes it sound greedy, even Satanic — “demanded autonomy to broaden their lists and retain their profits.”

Anyone who has worked for a university, not to mention a press, would find comical this idea that a university press thus bullied its parent institution into submitting to its will. Also, this is the period most active for the founding of presses by universities and they were clearly started as publishing houses rather than the evolved university print shops of that earlier era’s Fitzpatrick documents. Within eighteen months of the founding of my own press in 1925, we had published books by faculty from California, Columbia, George Washington, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Smith, and Virginia.

But even more to the point, we should look at the context of this Edenic, prelapsarian, university publishing of the 1890s into the 1920s — a period at the beginning of which the entire body of Humanities and Social Science researchers at U.S. universities numbered fewer than 1000 men, (for they were almost all men) and when most library collections were housed in departments, and managed by scholars, rather than centralized. Indeed, as the University of Chicago sociologist Andrew Abbott has found, the rise of the modern university press occurred at the same time as the professionalization of the university libraries and both in response to a dramatic, ten-fold expansion in research faculty between World War I and World War II. “This period,” Abbott writes, “produces the first clear evidence of a division between the scholars and the librarians” — note the division here — “the scholars favoring specialized tools and departmental librarians, the librarians universalist tools and centralized libraries.” Abbott continues, “the emergence and consolidation of university presses in the 1910s and 1920s was essentially a response of universities to the overburdening of the earlier scholarly publication system.” Thus the birth — and, I would argue, the fate — of the modern university library and university press is intertwined in the professionalization of Higher Education management, with centralized libraries and university presses founded by growing universities to solve, yes, a “crisis in scholarly publishing.”

So if there was a pre-Capitalist “gift economy” Eden when faculty managed their own publications and universities saw to publishing their own faculty, “tending to their own gardens,” rather than contributing to the global enterprise of scholarly publication, it was with a bite of the apple of professionalism by both libraries and presses — that is, in the modernization of publication, distribution, bibliography, collection, and preservation of knowledge. Returning to an algorithmically-enhanced, institution-specific system modeled on that of pre-War America in our own time of increasingly networked scholarship and amid a complex, highly commercialized information ecology would involve a lot of devolution by both presses and libraries.

III: The Monograph

At the center of the debate over the future of scholarly communication — and the future of university presses — lies the humble monograph, of which libraries complain they do not get enough use and presses complain they do not get enough sales. Someone always seems to be to blame for the monograph: authors for writing them, publishers for publishing them, libraries for not buying them. A recent blog post from the Chronicle of Higher Education’s estimable Jennifer Howard carried the impatient headline “Ditch the Monograph.” Kathleen Fitzpatrick, in her book Planned
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Obsolescence proposes that scholarship could be better carried out in blogs than monographs. And one of its authors, media scholar and philosophical provocateur Ian Bogost, diagnosed in his recent Alien Phenomenology that too often scholars write “not to be read, but merely to have written.”

This concern is not a recent one. An early, almost annoyingly charming promotional piece from 1937, “Some Presses You Will Be Glad to Know About,” profiled ten scholarly presses — one based at a library — and cites the origin of the modern university press as coming from the universities’ realization “that it was unfair to expect the average publisher to market books possessed of such little popular appeal but at the same time such real importance.” The University of Chicago’s Andrew Abbott confirms that, as early as 1927, there were complaints about “the overproduction of second-rate material,” scholar’s “excessive specialization,” and the difficulty of publishing “important work with such small audiences.” There is, the monograph crisis in uto, some eighty-five years ago.

So what is the scholarly monograph, and why are we still publishing them? The Webster’s definition of a monograph is “a learned treatise on a small area of knowledge,” and most other dictionaries follow suit. But for scholarly publishing purposes, I have my own definition: “a monograph is a scholarly book that fails to sell.” At the time when the University Press Ebook Consortium (now part of Project Muse) was forming, I found myself in a heated argument with a fellow university press director on whether there was any such thing as individual, non-library purchasers of scholarly monographs. After an hour, I finally realized that he exempted from his definition of “monograph” any book that actually sold or had significant course use or bookstore sales. Monographs, thus, are what we in university presses call the books that don’t sell.

As that anecdote suggests, I could talk about this for an hour. But let’s look at the sales profiles of two revised humanities dissertations by untutored authors, published the same season by my press. As you can see, one sold twice as many copies as the other, and while library sales made up an overwhelming total — over 2/3 of the sales of the money-losing “monograph” — they were well under half of the successful “scholarly book.” Again these are both revised dissertations by untutored faculty in English departments.

Now look at a non-monographic scholarly book by a senior academic that came out the same year — one of those “midlist trade books” — and you’ll see the library share of sales goes down to below 20%. So where we’ve relied on libraries the most is with the books that don’t recover their costs — the books we publish for reasons of mission rather than sustainability.

In the economics of university presses, the two “scholarly” books helped pay for the “monograph” and others like it. When Open Access advocates make the point that most scholarly authors do not benefit monetarily from sales of their works (they do, of course, benefit significantly from the status of having published them with university presses), that criticism is, strictly speaking, accurate. What happens, rather, is in the manner of the scene of the bank run on the Bailey Savings and Loan in Frank Capra’s beloved “It’s a Wonderful Life.” The money made from Author B and Author C’s books are reinvested by the press in the one by Author A. Unlike the predatory bank owned by the magnate Mr. Potter (by which we might read Elsevier), university presses do not exist to make a profit or serve shareholders, but rather to allocate investment and distribute risk. And when you consider that the AAUP and the modern university press was founded at the height of the Great Depression, this all makes sense.

The Bailey Savings and Loan did not provide “Open Access” to money — it was not part of a pre-Capitalist “gift economy.” Rather it distributed costs and reinvested revenues across the community of Bedford Falls much in the manner of Social Security and Medicare or, for that matter, JSTOR or Project Muse. And ask a scholar publisher — you can hear a bell ring every time a monograph sells well enough to gain its wings as a scholarly book.

IV: Creative Destruction

As I have said elsewhere, the term “Open Access” has two lives, one as a description of the increasingly vigorous environment for freely-shared scholarship and the other as a political term and economic cudgel. Open access as practice, as in the digital humanities, can coexist with and enrich the existing system of formal monograph and journal publication and, I believe, even relieve some of the financial pressure that besets it. Open Access as oppositional rhetoric, as struggle to the death, promises instead a long stretch of turmoil, of “creative destruction,” but with the potential for a utopian outcome — utopias, however, being notoriously difficult to achieve in anyone’s lifetime and often accompanied by unintended consequences. As Donald Waters, the Program Officer for Scholarly Communication at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation observed in a talk at the University of Michigan Libraries in 2007, later reprinted in the Michigan Library-sponsored open access Journal of Electronic Publishing, the issues surrounding open access publishing “may not be as straightforward as they appear to those partisans who are actively engaged in the debates.” Waters later elaborates, “open access [needs to] be balanced against the need for sustainability. It may be in the public interest to mandate open access, but it may equally be a failure of public trust if such a mandate is not balanced by consideration of a requirement for sustainability so that the content and the publisher endure.”

When I listen to Open Access advocates talk about the “broken” system of scholarly publishing, what I hear is cable news political pundits talking about how Social Security and Medicare are “broken” and need to be replaced by mutual funds or vouchers — the prelude to solving a problem in our neoliberal epoch is always destroying rather than reinforcing what is already in place. The economic term for this is “Creative Destruction,” as elaborated by Austrian-school economist Joseph Schumpeter in opposition to the Keynesian economics that guided New Deal programs of the 1930s. In our time, “Creative Destruction” has come to be seen as essential for economic growth, its “disruptions” necessary for the creation of the new. In the Urban renewal that swept American cities in the 1950s and 1960s and in the replacement of public transit systems, such as Los Angeles’s streetcar network by highways (highways that themselves became clogged with traffic, necessitating the current reconstruction of L.A.’s streetcar network at great expense), we can see the effectiveness of “Creative Destruction” in spurring new development as well as its unintended consequences of making a desert of the public sphere. As the geographer David Harvey described the process, “old places have to be devalued, destroyed, and redeveloped.”

In our own world of scholarly publishing, a recent example of “Creative Destruction” was the decision, later rescinded, to close the “broken” University of Missouri Press and replace it with something new and “next-generation” for which, the newly-arrived software-entrepreneur President of the University later admitted they didn’t yet have a plan. One Open Access blogger hailed the threatened closure as a “positive bellwether for a healthy shift in emphasis from one model of scholarly publishing to another,” without, of course, specifying what that “another” consisted of. As a tide of resistance to the closure to the University of Missouri Press rose from scholars, authors, university donors, readers, booksellers, public librarians, and the editorial pages of every newspaper in the state, many of us in university presses nevertheless fretted that our colleagues in the academic library world, our longterm allies, were largely, if not entirely, silent.

I am not going down the road of righteous indignation here. Indeed, the threatened Missouri closure was in the news at the same time as the Georgia State case, and the academic library community could itself feel our long partnership was being betrayed. Both Missouri and Georgia State strike me as warning signs that we are failing to openly and collaboratively solve the challenges that face both our professions in the digital transition. I continue to believe, as I said when I last addressed this audience in 2009, that “if we’re not in this together, we should be” for the good of scholarly communication and the university as a whole.

V: Evolution

In place, then, of Creative Destruction, I propose a model of evolution, or continued co-evolution of presses along with libraries. Arguably, libraries and presses have been continued on page 61
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evolving in different directions, but if that divergence gets much wider it will lead to chaos and to a less rigorous system of scholarly communication precisely at the moment when the explosion of information and discourse demands more interlinked systems.

Some will say, have said, that presses are an evolutionary deadend — a “dinosaur” — and eagerly await their extinction in the tar pits of the open Web, a commercialized mire that, frankly, is just as likely to swallow libraries. But I wouldn’t count presses out. As Leila summarized and of which Alison’s presentation will provide further testimony, while remaining true to their mission, presses have innovated constantly and continue to do so. A university press launched Project Muse, and we collaborated eagerly in the creation of JSTOR, cornerstones of Humanities and Social Science scholarship. And the eBook programs on both those platforms have the potential to bring new life and usage even to the disparaged monograph. After all, how many believed that journal backfiles could gain such usage before the advent of JSTOR?

But there are different forms of evolution, one involving gradual change — hardly visible — and one punctuated change — occurring rapidly, often in response to a moment of systemic crisis and stress. Particularly now, with the economic stress on higher education and the rise of the digital humanities and open scholarship, university presses — and indeed the entire scholarly communication system — are clearly in one of those periods of rapid and critical change responding to stress. And while university presses are evolving, they need to evolve faster — away from a closed system of scholarship and the contained, siloed content of the monograph and journal issue toward the kind of database structure that is implicit in the very system of rigorously-confirmed references and notes that underlie all our publications — for truly university press publications were hyperlinked via footnotes and endnotes decades before the creation of the Internet.

What will this new system look like when fully evolved? What I see ahead for the humanities and social sciences is an intensely innovative, hybridized environment for university scholarly communication — one that encompasses both open access and nonprofit models, scholarship in university repositories and that publishes by presses in the established forms of eBooks and e-journals, large digital humanities initiatives, and a lively constellation of individual and collaborative scholarly blogs, micro-blogs, and Websites.

In many cases, specific research projects will span and flow across all these forms in what I think of as a process of endosmosis and exosmosis, from less concentrated scholarly forms to more concentrated ones, such as the monograph, and back again.

The environment of scholarly communication, much of it informal and nonprofessionalized, has dramatically expanded in the past decade, and within it the boundaries of scholarly publishing, always formalized and professional, and of the scholarly monograph are breaking down. That is a good thing for both presses and authors. In line with the many discussions of tenure reform underway at research universities, the university press mission will, I expect, adjust from encompassing nearly all scholarship to specifically publishing works by authors who have the vocation to be scholarly authors. Not those authors, to repeat Ian Bogost’s taunt, “who write merely to have written” but rather those who write to be read. And while I do not speak for all university press publishers, it is increasingly clear to me that a policy toward copyright that allows scholarly authors to have greater control of their work, will help foster this much richer and more diverse scholarly communications ecology. Making that occur is something that libraries and presses should be talking about rather than lining up on one side or another.

But why are scholarly publishers and specifically university presses needed in this emerging environment when freely available software makes self-publishing an option for any scholar and when libraries are increasingly expanding their own missions to become...
Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fascicle 20: Competition

by Richard Abel (Aged Independent Learner) <reabel@q.com>

The writing preceding this end-piece is manifestly a history. Ipso facto, the writer was wearing the hat of an historian. This role is hardly surprising for, as openers, the writer was trained as an historian, having found the sovereign means of understanding from the early years, a more-or-less detailed account of how we have gotten into virtually every situation from the most mundane to the larger picture of world history. Secondly, and almost as personally compelling, the writer lived every moment of this history from its first unlikely and shaky venture into an esoteric species of bookselling to its absorption into the Blackwell holdings.

But such a close historical involvement has necessarily led to casting this summation into terms which might well seem to some readers to be prideful recital of a personal achievement. So, this end-piece is added to draw attention to the conscious use of the term “Band” in the title and to recall to the reader’s mind the use of the repeated image of the venture to that of the Greek Argonauts. In short this history would not have happened absent the conjoint knowledge, intelligence, and dedication of the entire crew of that Band, and particularly that of thoughtful input and sheer effort of the band of Branch Managers located across this nation and overseas.

Nor could it have been written absent the input and assistance of those still with us. The memory of any individual is potentially unreliable, subjective, and readily a partial thing. The writer was dependent from the opening of this story onward to resort to other accounts to form a full and trustworthy account of what happened in the period 30 to 50 years ago. As good fortune would have it, a few of that Band continued on working with scholarly books and libraries. As a consequence, they were well-positioned to intimately monitor the employment of those systems we pioneered. They were able to attest to the now continuous and world-wide employment of those systems we pioneered.

Lastly the writer seeks the reader’s indulgence in offering his thanks to that remarkable crew who served the world of books and libraries so inventively and diligently.

Note: Look for University of California Press director Alison Mudditt’s address in the next issue of ATG. — LS

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