2012

From A University Press-Keeping Presses Healthy

Leila W. Salisbury
University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, lsalisbury@ihl.state.ms.us

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg
Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6330
This anniversary moment is perhaps a good time to look at where university presses have collectively come and where they are headed in the next 75 years. AAUP board president Peter Dougherty (Princeton University Press) notes, “While our 75th anniversary gives us the opportunity to reflect on our celebrated past, it also provides us a setting to frame the ways in which we will move forward as an innovative publishing force intent on reaching more readers in more corners of the world than ever before.” At first it appeared that the AAUP would have been mobilized long before a closure announcement. University presses cannot afford to be more useful, is to posit some ideas about what we’re doing and we don’t need administrators’ unhelpful meddling. I do wonder, however, if there isn’t another important reason some university press administrators want to hide when they should be out hosting an educational seminar for faculty: publishing and scholarly communication are changing so rapidly that we don’t know what we’re doing 100% of the time. We’re forced to experiment with different business models, content delivery formats, and marketing tactics. What’s more disconcerting, some of these experiments may not work, and who wants to admit that to a provost or library dean? But as Kathryn Schultz argues in her fascinating book Being Wrong, using error and the knowledge it brings to make better subsequent decisions makes us smarter and stronger — both as individuals and organizations. Situations and patterns of student and faculty behavior change all the time. Given this environment, not experimenting would have to be a provost or library dean? But as Kathryn Schultz argues in her fascinating book Being Wrong, using error and the knowledge it brings to make better subsequent decisions makes us smarter and stronger — both as individuals and organizations. Situations and patterns of student and faculty behavior change all the time. Given this environment, not experimenting won’t prevent you from being wrong. More likely, you’ll end up being wrong/inefficient/risking irrelevance if you stand in the same place while your authors and customers have already walked two blocks ahead of you.

Perhaps it is truly to our advantage as university press leaders to freely admit that our old world has shattered, and also confess that we are not completely certain what scholarly communication will look like in five or ten years, much less 75. Ellen Faran, director of the MIT Press, notes: “We can gauge the impact of some of the transitions underway around us but can only guess at the size and shape of others.” Rather than understanding this as a weakness, however, Faran instead argues that change actually facilitates the continued relevance of university presses: “A fluid environment is a great place for presses whose missions and values are aligned with those of scholars and academic institutions. A fluid environment increases the importance of publishing distinctive work. The rapid changes swirling around us may seem disconcerting at first, but our responsibility today is to thrive amidst fluidity.”

This is no easy task, certainly. But is there really a choice? On a recent conference call with a consultant, a librarian, and a campus IT manager, the consultant made the following two statements in rapid succession: “You [university presses] are overadapted to a vanishing ecological niche” and “You are attached to an unworkable business model.” After a long moment of silence, the librarian and I began to laugh and said, “Yeah, you’re probably right....” While the consultant’s assessment and predictions were fairly dire and I would argue (or at least hope) that he had overstated the case a bit, what he wanted to emphasize was that publishers, libraries, and scholarly societies cannot go it alone; we have to work together to solve our collective problems. We in scholarly communications, broadly defined, find ourselves in a place — the campus, the world of ideas — where our output and activities have irrevocably knit us together, and the task now is to acknowledge that the work of our separate groups must now join in support of these common goals.

“As the traditional boundaries of our world dissolve, so our connections strengthen,” Faran says. So in the next 75 years of our collective work, we as university presses should operate from the perspective that the processes of outward communication and learning from our constituents must drive our internal vision for our work as scholarly publishers. Not that we should be dictated to, for we have a valuable role and perspective of our own within this ecosystem, but we also cannot exist independently of the world we work to serve. We are not the aging, lumbering dinosaurs of scholarly communication that the media, especially as it covered the Missouri situation, frequently paints presses to be.

But neither are we immune from the natural evolution of our world. Electronic content in all its varied forms — databases, monograph aggregations, books by the chapter purchased or loaned — is here to stay and must be made available alongside print books. We must stop...

continued on page 70
On the 2012 celebration is presses’ role in “contributing to an informed society.” For that is the true work an AAUP member press undertakes for all its constituents, local, national, and international — the books, journals, reference works, apps, and scholarly networks of these publishers offer reliable information, knowledge, and lasting availability through a variety of formats. AAUP’s “Books for Understanding” program, listing the highest-quality books across a spectrum of contemporary issues, demonstrates what the American university press means for an educated citizenry, and the University Press Week Fine Print!” (not just print!) online gallery highlights what it has meant for disciplines and communities for more than a century.

Creating an informed society is certainly impossible without the work of librarians, and so our talks with each other continue and intensify. Libraries and university presses are the most natural of partners, and so we are intensifying. Libraries and university presses are an integral part of a university’s community and, more, can help to open up that community in irreplaceable ways.

University Press Week will carry the lesson of Missouri into all of our communities. The focus of the 2012 celebration is presses’ role in “contributing to an informed society.” For that is the true work an AAUP member press undertakes for all its constituents, local, national, and international — the books, journals, reference works, apps, and scholarly networks of these publishers offer reliable information, knowledge, and lasting availability through a variety of formats. AAUP’s “Books for Understanding” program, listing the highest-quality books across a spectrum of contemporary issues, demonstrates what the American university press means for an educated citizenry, and the University Press Week Fine Print! (not just print!) online gallery highlights what it has meant for disciplines and communities for more than a century.

Creating an informed society is certainly impossible without the work of librarians, and so our talks with each other continue and intensify. Libraries and university presses are the most natural of partners, and so we are intensifying. Libraries and university presses are an integral part of a university’s community and, more, can help to open up that community in irreplaceable ways.