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Introduction

University of Michigan Press (UMP) and MIT Press (MITP) both launched our own e-book platforms in 2019. The experience has been heartening in confirming that this is an important direction, for both similar and different reasons for each of us. This paper provides background and the context in which these presses came to the decision to build their own platforms, what each press learned over the course of the first year, and where things are going. While this paper does not cover all of the finer details of the initiatives that each press has invested in and is developing with regard to e-books and libraries, it does offer an overview of the first year for our platforms and the main directions ahead.

MIT Press: Direct

MIT Press, established in 1962, was an early innovator in the digital publishing space, launching CogNet, our Cognitive Sciences database, in 2000. While we had offered select e-book content through CogNet, until 2019 we relied on third-party vendors to distribute the majority of our e-book content. Direct was created to host and deliver the MITP academic e-books to libraries in particular, rather than aggregate the content of other presses. While the platform does not currently include textbooks or reference works, it offers a place to access all academic books, as well as academic trade titles. MITP continues to grow and strengthen our trade book program, textbooks, and journals program, as well as to offer CogNet. The diversity of products helps to support our academic books program. We have also been developing our open access (OA) offerings, both through OA journals as well as books supported through TOME, the MIT Libraries funding, and Knowledge Unlatched. In 2019, we received generous support from the Arcadia Fund to develop a business model for open access scholarly books.

The decision to launch a platform was a substantial one. We knew it would be a significant financial investment and that there would be much to learn as we took on the work that we had traditionally

outsourced to aggregators. In choosing to create Direct, we relied, in part, on our governance structure for feedback and support. Reporting into the MIT Libraries, as well as having a management board comprised of both MIT faculty and leaders outside the institute, we drew from extensive knowledge and expertise in the library and publishing arena. In addition, we surveyed and spoke with a wide range of libraries internationally.

In launching Direct, we have been able to highlight some of our core strengths through our subject collections in Economics; Environmental Science; Philosophy; and Science, Technology, and Society. We now have a place of our own to host OA books. Direct has led us to consider the importance of developing a library advisory board. And we continue to strengthen community engagement through ongoing initiatives, such as the MIT Libraries Open Access Taskforce, involvement with the AUPresses community, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives. All of these help to improve how we are delivering our books.

Why Direct for E-Books?

There were four closely connected reasons that MITP moved forward with Direct: relationships, ownership, experimentation, and mission-alignment.

Relationships

Working through third-party vendors to deliver e-books means a lack of direct relationships with libraries. The Direct platform requires building partnerships with libraries that allow for more responsive design and development. Already, in our first year, these relationships with libraries have provided feedback that we have incorporated into our e-book delivery to positive effect. These include providing an exclusions list for the platform, creating a VPAT to understand our strengths and areas for improvement with regard to accessibility, as well as aggregator information in our title lists to be transparent about where libraries may have purchased books on other

platforms. These changes help us respond to collection development hurdles presented, on one hand, by duplication and, on the other, ensuring completeness of a collection from a single press.

Ownership

Owning our own e-book delivery has meant taking control of our own assets, our data, and our brand. We are able to choose in which ways content is collected and curated. Where aggregators may choose which books appear on their platform, MITP can offer a complete academic book frontlist on our own platform. It also means that the reporting data we see is more consistent and coherent. Although this will develop much further as a greater number of libraries use Direct, even in our first year, we are able to see more detailed usage and consider how we might be able to shape and expand these reports to ensure libraries are getting what they need.

Mission-Alignment

Coming directly out of ownership is the ability Direct provides for MITP to align more closely with our mission and that of our parent institution. Through Direct we can further support MIT's mission to advance research, teaching, and solutions to real-world problems.

Experimentation

With ownership, mission-alignment, and better relationships with libraries comes the space to experiment. We are considering new e-book collections based on feedback, as well as current trends. In particular, we are able to consider how we can innovate and find sustainable ways forward for open access scholarly books.

University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection

The University of Michigan Press (UMP) is part of the second wave of university presses, founded in 1933. For many decades, publishing at the University of Michigan grew out of diverse and dispersed communities. As early as 1930, the press was founded as a division of the University Library (UM Library), and nearly 70 years later in 2000, the library created the Scholarly Publishing Office (SPO) to serve the needs of authors and readers. In 2009, oversight of the University of Michigan Press moved back to the UM Library. Not long after, all publishing activities were unified under a

single brand name, Michigan Publishing, with an associate university librarian for publishing (AUL) who also acts as the director of the press. Michigan Publishing is now the hub of publishing activities undertaken by the University of Michigan Library. Michigan Publishing combines the strengths of a highly regarded university press with the innovative, service-oriented approach of a university library renowned as a leader in digital initiatives and technologies, such as University of Michigan Digital Library eXtension Service (DLXS), Text Creation Partnership, Early English Books Online, HathiTrust, and TOME.

The University of Michigan Press Ebook Collection (UMP EBC) is a comprehensive collection of the scholarly output of the press and while it does not include our English-language teaching or trade titles, it offers libraries and researchers the best possible version of our e-books from our frontlist of academic and adoptable books. The full title list is online because we are committed to full transparency so libraries can see titles the press publishes and what is included/excluded from UMP EBC, along with pricing. Our e-books come from our key areas of expertise like performing arts, classics, and music, which are rich visually and often come with unique accessibility challenges. UMP EBC gave us a way to make these enhanced materials available, including our open access titles, both which still remain problematic for commercial vendors to accurately display and provision to libraries. We also are able to follow accessibility standards, provide a public VPAT, and make a firm preservation commitment, adhering to the Charlotte Principles.

Since the launch of UMP EBC we have established a Fulcrum Steering Committee and remain committed to community-led governance, having completed the It Takes a Village workshop through LYRASIS, and we have begun to look at building a library advisory board. We continue to strengthen community engagement through our Accessibility User Groups and other initiatives, such as the LYRASIS Leaders Forums and Catalyst Fund, and have created a new role within publishing for an engagement manager. We actively listen and partner at library conferences and pursue opportunities within the AUPresses and Humanities communities.

Why Is University of Michigan Ebook Collection on Fulcrum?

There were three main motivations for the University of Michigan Press to develop and launch UMP EBC:

advancing digital scholarship, mission-alignment and shared values, and sustaining open source infrastructure.

Advancing Digital Scholarship

Michigan Publishing has a tradition of advancing digital scholarship, especially doing so within the UM Library mission. First, the UMP EBC grew out of a rather unique library environment and scholarly mission. Our Library Information Technology (LIT) division has a tradition of leading, experimenting, and resourcing innovative digital projects. In fact, the birth of UMP EBC originates in the second Andrew W. Mellon grant (April 2018–March 2020), which is focused on sustainability. This posits that the main way of sustaining (and diversifying our publishing revenue using our strengths in digital publishing) our own Fulcrum platform will be selling content collections—first our own UMP EBC, and potentially others, directly to libraries. Mellon’s support has really echoed “making digital scholarship safe for humanists,” so UMP EBC is very much in tune with this.

Fulfilling Our Mission by Offering the Best Possible Version of Our Press E-Books on the Best Possible Terms to Libraries and Doing So by Leading With Shared Library Values

We discovered a growing frustration from libraries embracing e-books with the purchase models, content restrictions, user experience, and overall licensing terms. There were particular issues with less than ideal user experiences due to DRM and most platforms lacked accessibility features. Also, long-term preservation of e-book content and especially multimedia files was lacking and it was frustrating for libraries and university presses, especially as e-books are increasingly a part of our world as the version of record, slowly edging print. Combined, there was an opportunity to meet those needs and leverage our shared values in both content and platform; essentially “created by a library, with libraries, for libraries.”

Creating and Sustaining a Publishing Ecosystem That Catalyzes Readership and Engagement With the Next Generation of Humanities Scholarship

UMP has a commitment as a publisher to sustaining open source infrastructure. Fulcrum is an open source platform built from within the UM Library with support from the Andrew W. Mellon

Foundation. When a library supports the purchase of UMP EBC, the money sustains the Fulcrum platform and contributes to other open source tools in this landscape. Increasingly, authors in the areas we publish are very interested in enhanced e-books and finding ways to integrate multimedia and data into the reading experience. Open source platforms experiment with a variety of forms of e-books. UMP wants to provide a way for authors to do this work, making it discoverable through libraries. Catalyzing readership and engagement with the next generation of humanities scholarship makes this more than a collection of e-books for sale to libraries, but rather an ecosystem of support for authors to achieve their goals and a space where libraries, publishers, and readers can invest in transparent, fair, and innovative solutions for digital scholarship.

Is It Working? Are UMP EBC and Direct Living Up to Expectations?

While there have been unexpected and interesting challenges, both MITP and UMP have seen great successes in the first year. For both presses, universities and colleges of differing types and sizes have invested in our platform collections. It has been extremely encouraging to see that the institutions that have been early adopters have come from a wide range of places, sizes, and types of institution. They have not always been the candidates we would have expected at the outset. There remains a challenge in understanding why the candidates both presses would have considered most likely to purchase collections are not yet on board.

Another particularly challenging piece has been building capacity and learning to take on the labor that has been managed, often unseen, by aggregators. Ensuring that all discovery services are receiving the data they need and that licenses are in place, for instance, has pushed us to learn more deeply the details of being good services providers for libraries.

We can sum up the first year and look forward to the next using the following framework:

Establish Principles

Our principles must be our central reference point. We must innovate by committing to a holistic, “values-based” mindset, not just a solely “values-based” selection process. In launching our own platforms, we have acted on our values, ensuring that the way we shape the delivery and access to our

books aligns with our missions. We have begun to build this in our first year and will continue to do this as we grow. It will be an ongoing process to evaluate and assess where we are in line with our values and where we might need to push ourselves further. We also need to find the right balance between our principles and financial sustainability. Moving forward, MITP and UMP continue to examine values and mission. How do we manifest these?

UMP EBC has a focus on pricing transparency, which leaves open a number of questions in relation to library sales. Is there a risk that transparency (for pricing and title lists) might affect sales interests? Are special deals needed, even where values-driven transparency is central? There is a concern for both university presses that where larger commercial entities may be able to offer greater discounting, for example, for larger quantities of content purchased, smaller presses may not stay viable offering such pricing. Do and will libraries expect discounting from smaller presses and nonprofits on par with that of larger commercial enterprises? How can we have more open, productive conversations with libraries about these concerns? Can university presses and libraries work together to overcome risk-averse behavior that might slow change? There are ongoing considerations about how values-based approaches impact traditional product development frameworks; and if they do, how (and whether) it matters that libraries align their values with academy-led publishers.

Embrace Exploration, Agility, and Humility

We are perpetual searchers and seekers, always novices and beginners. Transformation comes from discovering the right questions more than having the right answers. It is also important to be open with our partners about the constraints we are working within and how we, as university presses, can find sustainable pathways to innovation and change. We are competing in a difficult market with larger players of greater capacity. We need to build from our strengths and examine our weaknesses. It is important to continue to look at the blind spots and silos in our workflows and consider how we develop greater skills in product management, strategic marketing, and client success and engagement.

It has been an important point to take stock, after one year, of what we have achieved. It is also relevant to consider what the metrics are for success. We measure revenue and number of library

partners, but are there other measures of success in considering the shift toward engagement and impact within the scholarly community? UMP is offering Fulcrum as a site for other publishers, which requires consideration of other presses' needs and requirements. MITP has to manage an external platform provider relationship. Both presses invest in library partnerships. How do these relationships factor into success? In this regard, we must also consider what distinguishes us in the competitive scholarly publishing space. Is it possible to embody collegiality and embrace sharing, transparency, and humility, while also meeting financial sustainability? Does this matter to libraries?

Take Action

We cannot think ourselves into new ways of action; rather, we act ourselves into a new way of thinking. Impactful change will only happen when we take risks, focus on people, and shift from monologue to dialogue when engaging with the communities we serve. The challenge for both presses is in continuing to push forward the movement to dialogue, while also making clear the challenges for university presses in the current market.

In taking action, both presses are confronted with delivering value as library budgets shrink and presses need to do more with greater economic efficiencies as per unit sales of academic monographs decrease. We both, in moving forward, need to consider how we collaborate, outsource, and share in this market while remaining aligned to our mission and commitments. As we are now both able to connect with the library community more directly through our platforms, we are taking a different role and position in relation to library practice. We need to continue to connect and contribute to library practice clearly and explicitly.

MITP and UMP have taken different approaches to open infrastructure: UMP built Fulcrum as an open source platform. MITP, like Duke University Press, chose a commercial platform provider, Silverchair, to provide their technological infrastructure. The decision to do so was done on the basis of functionality and capacity for approaching sales and library content delivery. Questions remain with regard to how support for open infrastructure or academy-led platforms matter in supporting the ecosystem, the options small academic presses have, and how libraries support this emerging infrastructure.

We move forward from our first year with a tremendous amount of new knowledge and encouraging support from the library community. We have had the privilege of learning from each other, as well as forward-thinking, experienced university presses like Duke University Press, which has had their own platform for a decade. Each university press operates within the larger publishing ecosystem, but we

have different constraints, whether because of our size, our relationship to our parent institutions, or the subject areas in which we publish. Understanding our similarities and differences has helped us build on what we know to start to make a success of having our own e-book platforms. We are ready for what the next year brings and hope to continue the conversation on what we are learning.