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From the University Presses-University Presses and ATM Publishing

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From the University Presses — University Presses and STM Publishing

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It's an old joke, but still a good one. When asked why he robbed banks, **Willie Sutton** famously answered, "Because that's where the money is."

When it comes to the academic marketplace, university presses have mostly not gone where the money is — core introductory textbooks and STM journals. We opt instead to publish humanities and social science books and journals. There are exceptions — **Oxford, Cambridge, Chicago, California, Princeton, and Hopkins**. But they tend to prove the rule.

There have been some good reasons for this — developing and marketing a core textbook can cost six or seven figures, making it a high-risk, high-reward venture, while STM publishing is journal-centric, highly competitive, an area where presses generally lack expertise, and also high-risk, high-reward. University press budgets don't much allow for high-risk.

There are also historical

reasons for the failure to publish more science, especially the research article, and I'd like to stick with science for the rest of this column. Presses, though this fact is lost on most university administrators now, were founded in the U.S. specifically to disseminate scholarship whose commercial value was insufficient to attract commercial publishers, especially that produced by local faculty. While some science fell into this category, university presses, for reasons I'd love others to explain — I've never seen an adequate history of the subject — focused after World War II on the research monograph in the humanities and social sciences. It may be in part that the staff at most presses tended to be humanists or social scientists to begin with, and so in part pursued what they liked and felt comfortable with, and it may be that the money didn't seem quite so important in those loftier days. It is also true that investment capital has never been abundant in the nonprofit university

presses. Whatever the reasons, university press catalogues and Websites don't include a lot of science in 2013.

This is a bad thing on many fronts. First, presses, at least since the famous **Ithaka** report, *University Publishing in a Digital Age* (<http://sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/university-publishing-digital-age>) very much want to reflect the strengths and mission of the parent university. This is hard to do when your offerings are restricted to maybe half the schools and colleges to be found at the average research university. If half the faculty doesn't really look at what you publish except for the occasional regional book or volume on a subject in which they have a passing, but not professional, interest, it's harder to convince them of your vital importance to the core mission.

Second, and returning to the **Willie Sutton** theme, there's money to be made in STM publishing and, what should be most important to administrators, there's even more money universities — and their libraries — could save if university presses were involved in disseminating the scientific research article.

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Consider for a moment the way current STM publishing largely exists. Universities (and the government in the form of grants) pay faculty to conduct research. They then write up that research and give it away — largely to commercial publishers, either directly or via learned societies allied to them. Those publishers then either impose all their charges on the author and/or his institution to edit, design, hyperlink, and ultimately publish the piece OR just sell it back to a much broader spectrum of institutions and individuals for smaller fees. That is, they disseminate the piece by either an open access or end-user — perhaps penultimate end-user since libraries buy and house but don't use — pays model.

Now consider how the model would work if university presses were publishing science. Instead of either giving or paying to give scholarship to for-profit entities whose first responsibility is to enrich investors (I don't condemn enriching investors — my retirement is built upon the idea!), the university would invest the money within the university. Presses would have a new source of capital and depending on the dissemination model used, libraries would have lower or much lower charges. Even in a subscription model system, a university press would be very unlikely to charge the same fees that for-profit publishers are charging. At minimum their margin requirement would be much lower. There are no investors to enrich.

But how can university presses, with little or no experience, begin to publish science journals? What incentives could be offered to faculty, who want to publish in the most prestigious outlets in order to achieve broad dissemination and, yes, career advancement? How can administrators be convinced to make the initial infrastructure investments that would surely be required?

There are several potential paths forward. First would be taking on already-existing journals currently being published by units within the same university. These have to be found, which is not always as easy as it sounds — few universities have a current census of all the journals owned or edited on their campuses — but there are obvious economic and editorial

advantages in publishing already-established journals, especially in one's own backyard.

Taking an almost-opposite tack, it is also true that science is exploding globally, including in many non-English-speaking countries. Those places will surely want to disseminate their own scholarship to a broad English-speaking audience (we're blessed in using what has become the world's *lingua franca*) and it's not hard to imagine putting together a package that would involve translation and/or editing services as well as distribution for foreign-language journals.

It's also possible to envision starting new STM journals that emerge organically from departments and centers within the home university. This is hard — faculty will be anxious to establish themselves as quickly as possible — but with appropriate incentives from administrators and perhaps some moral suasion from librarians, it may occasionally be possible.

It also is time for learned societies and universities to recognize that the latter indirectly subsidize the former every time their library buys a society journal or provides a stipend for a faculty member to join the society. One of the most bitter experiences I had when working in social science journals in the early 2000s was the discovery that even those journals would flock to commercial publishers based on the promise of more lucrative financial returns to the society, even when that meant increasing the cost to subscribers, both institutional and individual. This is a very hard nut to crack, but couldn't a task force of university press publishers, faculty, librarians, and societies try to find a way to at least start forward?

That semi-cooperative idea brings me to my last idea. Why don't university presses, faced with high start-up costs and higher-than-accustomed risk in making a move toward STM journals, take a page from library colleagues and begin to behave consortially? If university presses could band together on various aspects of an STM journals publishing program, they could surely achieve scale more quickly than if each tried to invent the wheel itself. All could take advantage of various vendor platforms, linking systems, subscription management software, peer-review systems, and all the other back-office needs of a journals program.

Editorially, perhaps each press in a consortium, when starting new journals, could focus

on areas of expertise within their universities, more swiftly bringing together overlapping but not identical strengths. One university's strength in obesity studies could be paired with another's in nutrition and another's in diabetes or vascular disease. Soon a critical mass in a broad area could help shorten the time needed to be recognized as a force in publishing around an intellectual area.

Such a consortium would be university-press based, but by including the other constituencies in the university — faculty, librarians, administrators, IT staff, and the like — it would be consortial within the university as well as outside it.

It is possible, even likely, that much of the above is harebrained to one degree or another. But I think not all of it. If university presses don't start developing new revenue streams and if universities don't start taking better care of theirs and their faculty's (and the U.S. government's) intellectual property, then what is the future of university presses?

All presses can and have made incremental improvements in both reducing cost and generating revenue through the use of digital technologies. Larger international markets do offer hope for our traditional programs. But if presses continue to serve only the least powerful constituencies on their campuses (let's be honest about it), how will we survive? It seems unlikely we'd be able to generate enough revenue to free us completely from some university support, but if we continue to rely on that support, then the relative lack of financial clout the humanities and social sciences wield will inevitably keep that funding minimal and continue the hand-to-mouth existence that most presses face today.

Let me end optimistically. Science and medicine are wondrous fields. On intellectual grounds alone university presses should engage them. The fact that our future economic stability may mandate that engagement is actually encouraging.

Science is part of what I see as a three-legged stool supporting university presses in the future. Textbooks and an end to the free-rider system of disseminating scholarship are the others. We have no desire and no need to abandon our old friends. But finally, let's also go where the money is. 🐘

Media-Centered — Documentary Film

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The use of film in the classroom is ubiquitous. Visual theses are on the rise. Interest in documentary studies is growing at an exponential rate. Resultantly, the importance of a rich and varied media resources collection is essential to academic institutions, public libraries, and K-12 media centers. It takes a lot of work, development, and research to maintain and grow a collection like this. Resources that aid in this process are invaluable...

Resonance of the Documentary Form...

"I've only ever cried at three movies in my life," my friend **Melissa** pronounced last year as we left the early screening of "Beasts of the Southern Wild" at the Varsity theater and strolled down Franklin Street to grab a slice at Pepper's. Such an incredulous comment stopped me in my tracks and I asked, "Really, only three?" She turned to me and

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