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The Ant, the University Press, and the Librarian

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The Ant, the University Press, and the Librarian. Reflections on the Evolution of Scholarly Communication

by **Patrick H. Alexander** (Director, The Pennsylvania State University Press) <pha3@psu.edu>

The **Pennsylvania State University** established a press-library collaboration in 2005. In due course, under the auspices of a newly created Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing, it successfully launched an Open Access monograph series, collaborated on several library book-publishing projects, a journal archive, a reprint series from the libraries' special collections, and another monograph/database project. I arrived in 2007, when things were just beginning to take shape. We were probably not unlike many press-library relationships that were being formed, doing our best to "make our way in the world today." It wasn't perfect, but it was decidedly a step in the right direction.

One aspect of the partnership became clear early: Our respective, different cultures did not always make communication or working together intuitive or straightforward. In an *Against the Grain* article that appeared in an issue co-edited with my friend and former colleague at the **Pennsylvania State University Libraries**, now the executive director of the **HathiTrust**, **Michael Furlough**,¹ I wrote about those different cultures. I reflected on a university press's "assets" in the press-library relationship. I proposed that presses were "assets," and I discussed these, not in contrast to the liabilities of a library or vice versa, but in terms of how presses and libraries differ culturally. I was spinning the differences between presses and libraries using the language of finance, but, in reality, I was obliquely pointing out that businesswise we were from two different planets, even if located on the same campus.

Over time my take on the cultural differences in the *ATG* article was reinforced, and I pointed to those differences whenever I talked about **Penn State's** press-library relationship. Three assets — more properly cultural differences — continue to hold import for me, and I suspect they could hold for other press-library relationships. Understanding and managing these cultural differences, as nearly as I can tell, continues to play an ongoing and determinative role in how presses and libraries will or will not work together. With a little elaboration, I review them below.

Although presses range widely in terms of size, audience, and mission — **University of Chicago Press** is not like the **University of Oklahoma Press**, and **University of Michigan Press** is not like **Kent State University Press** — most generally face outward to scholarly associations, researchers, and society writ large, rather than inward toward their campuses. Libraries, however, typically look inward, locally, toward their faculty and students. Understandably, that means libraries, comparatively, have enviable influence and power inside the university. They have solid networks and access to campus resources. They have the ear of the provost, may have contact with the president, and have a deep institutional history. Plus, people — donors — give libraries money. In contrast presses construct networks with societies, researchers, institutes, and authors, often in subject areas only loosely connected with the university. Consequently, presses historically built few if any powerful allies inside the university. Moreover, presses only rarely receive significant capital support. Once a press was moved under a library, for good or for ill, it quickly learned what a difference a library could make vis à vis recognition and access on one's own campus. For the first time, a few presses found institutional support and political cover in their relationship with the library.

Presses operate on the basis of a (theoretically) revenue-generating, cost-recovery market model; libraries operate on a subsidized, expenditure-based budget. As I have said often, libraries are given a pot of money out of which they must control their expenditures and operate successfully. Presses, in contrast, are given a largely empty pot (an average allocation applied to operating expenses is 8%–13%²) and are told to fill it with money. While neither is easy, those two approaches to managing finances are wildly different. Understanding existentially the difference between the two approaches is nearly impossible for either side and is the source for ongoing misunderstanding.

A third difference is linked both to the inward/outward and to the difference in how finances operate. On the one hand, libraries

are service-oriented; their "performance" does not depend on generating revenue to pay for costs. Although they obviously need money to offer services, the work that libraries do does not itself typically generate that revenue. Presses, on the other hand, are product-driven, and they are product-driven precisely because their product's sales performance determines their financial outcome. They're not spending from a pot of money, but are trying to fill that pot. But presses do more than cover operating costs when they sell a book or article. They are also generating a positive return (Tenure and Promotion) for their authors, societies, universities, and other partners, and they squirrel away money for the future. Libraries acquire their enormous clout and influence on campus precisely because they are so good at serving the campus community with the resources they receive. A library accomplishes its mission by serving its campus. Presses, however, facing outward and being output- or product-driven, are not a service culture (though they serve their university in other ways, e.g., in representing the university). This crucial distinction dictates that libraries say yes far more than they say no. Presses are exactly the opposite. Presses say no far more than they say yes. Presses simply cannot afford to say yes to every local or external publishing opportunity, even when their mission begs for them to do so, because measured use of resources is directly tied to their ability to meet their goal of output (=revenue). And their survival depends on achieving their goal.

What has transpired since the first *Against the Grain* article appeared? Are there any lessons to be learned about how presses and libraries can better cooperate, collaborate, and survive? Evidence from the **AAUP** report on press-library collaborations and from the **Library Publishing Coalition**³ confirms that library-press collaborations are on the rise and here to stay. It seems fairly certain, too, that "best practices" continue to be in relatively short supply. There are as many models in the relationship as there are presses and libraries. The differences, for example, among **Penn State**, **Michigan**, **Indiana**, and **Temple**, are legion. Press-library partnerships remain in ferment, and no single template for how these partnerships work exists.

Over time, both presses and libraries have evolved. Cultural differences shaped that evolution, motivating presses and libraries to adapt. Some early players, like **California Digital Library**, which is specifically designed to "support the **University of California** community's pursuit of scholarship"⁴ have an established reputation and a decidedly local focus. Others, like **MPublishing**, serve a broader community, including outside the campus.⁵ Despite initiatives like the 2012 **Amherst Col-**

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Academic Publishing Is Not ...
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orders at library wholesalers. The concept of plugging books into a traditional profit-and-loss spreadsheet to find the correct margin is as antiquated as printing for two years of inventory. The future isn't completely figured out for any university press. The format, distribution

method, and business model will evolve, and each publisher will strive for the proper balance among brand, efficiency, and external pressures. One thing does remain certain, however. As long as tenure exists and the monograph remains the most important criterion for promotion, university presses, as the gatekeepers of knowledge, will remain essential. I feel confident, having been there, that they will respond to any challenge, foreseen or unforeseen. 🌱

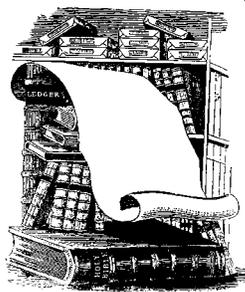
lege Press or perhaps the Library Publishing Coalition, libraries seem to be drifting away from traditional publishing (monographs and journals) and are instead applying their digital expertise to original campus-based, service-minded projects.⁶ The Oberlin Group's Lever Initiative⁷ may be an exception, but it remains in the planning stages. Not tackling traditional publishing and focusing instead on local publishing, however, makes perfect sense, since it accords with libraries' culture, and the need/opportunity is tremendous. Presses are quietly but quickly changing, creating digital workflows, being concerned about discoverability and DOIs, and holding their collective breath that things don't suddenly change. They are expanding into projects that include a digital component, but change, while seemingly dramatic, has been incremental; presses as a whole still primarily focus on publishing monographs, academic books, and journals.

One new expression that's entered the conversation, however, is *complement*. This term implicitly acknowledges that distinct differences in what university presses and libraries do — and that how they differ culturally — must be embraced. *Complement* underscores the unique contribution of each, the unique "assets," or the different strengths. Sure, a library could start publishing a monograph series, but to do so successfully it could risk forsaking the kinds of cultural qualities that make it a successful library. Moreover, such a rising and intense demand for library services already exists on campus that a library's taking on the role of a traditional press could deplete resources at the expense a library's mission. So the question for both presses and libraries becomes why not focus on what one does best?

Currency in the economy of libraries is service; for publishers, it's cash. As I am fond of saying, anyone can publish and lose money. Publishing is easy. Publishing ventures that disguise publishing costs by folding them into a much larger budget may be showing that they *can* publish and this may accomplish a service mission, but do such enterprises answer the question of how it is paid for? If I recall, im-

proving finances was one of the chief and early reasons presses were moved under libraries. Any provost with a pulse should want to see the financial benefit of a press-library relationship.

Universities face enormous pressure to address scholarly communications needs on their campuses. They strive to provide students and faculty broad digital access; they must respond to urgent needs for digital curation, EDTs, IRs, faculty work, and Big-Data research. They also provide essential support to faculty, students, and staff in and around intellectual property and copyright. All of these demands reflect local, campus-centric publisher services. Demands upon libraries to meet local scholarly communication needs are only increasing. Critical for building any campus publishing infrastructure is understanding the needs, the resources, the expectations of the campus audience. Not every library will want to bring a press under its aegis; not every press will look to its library to collaborate. But, if and when they do, each should complement the other in a manner that underscores the strengths of each, maximizes the efficiency of each, and fulfills the mission of each.



I once watched a video clip about ants — leafcutter ants. **E. O. Wilson** was monitoring the social life of ants. Who knew ants had social lives? So, **Wilson** and his team observe the ants working — as only ants and bees do — to harvest a certain fungi, their only food source. A select subgroup of the little workers harvest pieces of leaves — hence the name leafcutters — and drag them home to the nest. Another select group of ants is assigned to chew the cut-up leaves into a fungal paste for everyone's dinner. **Wilson** and his colleagues noticed that invariably a mold attacked the fungus paste — a mold that threatened to kill the fungi, the ants' only food source. They observed something else going on in that ecosystem. Besides the ants, the fungi, and the mold, there was another player. **Cameron Currie**, a graduate student at the time, now professor of microbiology at **University of Wisconsin-Madison**, discovered that the ants, as clever as a fable, in response to the mold produced an antibiotic that controlled the mold. Dinner served. Ant nest saved. Evolutionary biologists call this type of alliance in which both parties benefit symbiotic mutualism. "**Wilson** characterizes

the mutualistic symbiosis between ant and fungus as 'one of the most successful experiments in the evolution of life.'⁸ **Wilson** sees this mutualistic symbiosis as the second major force, perhaps second only to predation, responsible for successful coevolution of the Earth's biodiversity.

For millions of years plants and animal life forms have coevolved to the successful survival of each. For hundreds of years the academic book industry has survived because of similar mutualistic symbiotic relationships. Scholarly communication is — and always has been — evolving, from the original "wedge," cuneiform on clay tablets, to modern e-readers. Nowhere is that evolution more apparent than in press-library relationships. Working toward a mutualistic symbiotic relationship between university presses and university libraries, a relationship in which both parties benefit each other and exploit the unique strengths of one another, will be essential for their mutual survival. It may also mean respecting the differences of each as vital to the survival of both. 🐜

Endnotes

1. **Patrick H. Alexander**. "Publisher-Library Relations: What Assets Does a University Press Bring to the Partnership?" *Against the Grain*, Dec. 2008-Jan. 2009, p. 40-42. One of the great things about the partnership at **Penn State** was the chance to work with **Mike**. While we did not always agree, we always talked.
2. Somewhat anecdotal, but pretty reliable.
3. <http://www.aapnet.org/news-a-publications/news/1094-library-press-collaboration-report; for the LPC, see: http://www.librarypublishing.org/>.
4. <http://www.cdlib.org/about/mission.html>.
5. <http://www.publishing.umich.edu/>.
6. The **University of Pittsburgh's** Office of Scholarly Communication and Publishing publishes an impressive number of open access journals. It is unclear, however, what financial model supports their operation. Many of its journals have a campus component, which makes sense; others do not.
7. <http://leverinitiative.wordpress.com/>.
8. Listen to **E. O. Wilson** talk about the leaf-cutter ants and mutualistic symbiosis: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/library/01/3/_013_05.html, **E.O. Wilson, Ants and Ecosystems**. All rights reserved. 2001 WGBH Educational Foundation and Clear Blue Sky Productions, Inc.

up on the **Charleston Conference** by **David Scherer**, Scholarly Repository Specialist at **Purdue University Libraries**.

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/explore/LL-issue12.pdf>

Sad news to report. The wonderful **Miriam A. ("Mimi") Drake** died December 24, 2014 of complications caused by lung cancer. She was 78 years old. **Mimi** keynoted the **1992**

Charleston Conference when she was at the **Georgia Institute of Technology**. Her 1992 talk is highly relevant today: to convince university administrators that we librarians add value to the learning experience. **Christian Boissonnas** (remember him?) wrote her talk up for **Acqnet**. I understand that there will be an obituary in *Information Today* shortly. <http://serials.infomotions.com/acqnet/text/acq-v2n103.txt>

You know how I try to relate everything back to the **Charleston Conference** or *Against the Grain*. Okay. I admit it but, you know what,

it's not hard at all! So, I have to point out the absolutely riveting and relevant talk during **Charleston 2014** by **Adam Murray**, Dean and Associate Professor **Murray State University Library**. His talk (Punishment for Dreamers: Big Data, Retention, and Academic Libraries) was all about the academic library and how it fits in with increased calls for accountability, stretched budgets, and imperatives for student success.

<http://2014charlestonconference.sched.org/event/805f8e430f88bede27d259b7ddc51385#.VLwHXkuVip>

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