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Patrick H. Alexander

*The Pennsylvania State University Press, pha3@psu.edu*

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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>

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 campus. 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%) 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 confirms that library-press collaboration is 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” have an established reputation and a decidedly local focus. Others, like MPublishing, serve a broader community, including outside the campus. Despite initiatives like the 2012 Amherst Col...
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Against the Grain 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, 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 complements. This term implicitly acknowledges that distinct differences in what university presses and libraries do — and that how they differ culturally — must be embraced. Complements 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, improving 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, ETDs, 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 fungus, 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 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.’ 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 was — evolving, from the original “wedgie,” 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, pp. 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.
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.

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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: how 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/805f9e530f8087bede27d259b77dc51385#.VLwHXKuVipc

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