

2015

## Back Talk--I'm a Publisher Too!

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### Recommended Citation

Okerson, Ann (2015) "Back Talk--I'm a Publisher Too!," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 5, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7182>

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# Back Talk — I'm a Publisher Too!

Column Editors: **Ann Okerson** (Advisor on Electronic Resources Strategy, Center for Research Libraries) <aokerson@gmail.com>



The term “publishing” has been most often associated in our minds with formal production of authors’ scholarly or literary works, by specialist organizations ranging all the way from small ones to huge, wealthy, market-dominating commercial enterprises. There exists an immense number of kinds and types and shapes and business models of publishing activity, from university presses to learned societies to boutique houses supporting poetry in translation or regional belles-lettres or the kinds of cartoon maps distributed at outlet malls with a small note assuring users that “this map has been deposited with the **Library of Congress**.”

But perhaps even that broad description is too narrow these days; maybe everybody’s a publisher today: go to your BlogSpot site, write up what you had for breakfast and who annoyed you on your commute to work, post it, and you’re done. Congratulations!

In other words, it’s a jungle out there. Libraries in recent years have waded further and further into that jungle, finding new roles and possibilities for themselves. How do we make sense of that phenomenon?

I’ve gotten to know this landscape better in the last months. In July, **Alex Holtzman** (formerly director of **Temple University Press**) and I published a short monograph with the **Council on Library and Information Resources** called “The Once and Future Publishing Library,” available at: <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub166>.

**CLIR** has been known for years for its important publications program, led by the excellent **Kathlin Smith**. This particular project was funded by the **Goodall Family Foundation**, whose **Steve Goodall** is a friend and supporter of the **Charleston Conference**. He and **Katina Strauch** thought it time to explore a timely library topic. Library publishing was a natural fit, as **ATG** has already produced two special issues on this theme (2008 and 2015).

We reviewed the literature and pursued some investigations of our own, all immensely fruitful. In addition, I chaired a paper session at the recent Cape Town meetings of the **International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)** with five authors from North America, Europe, and Central Asia — **IFLA’s** great for bringing people together from many different time zones! Those papers all offered snapshots of how serious professionals are thinking about library publishing issues.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the topic attracts a lot of attention and energy, as you will also see from our extensive bibliography. The **Library Publishing Coalition** came into existence 2-3 years ago and has already published two detailed directories of activity in this sphere, interesting each in its own right, but also fruitful to compare the two to see the year-to-year changes. Two balancing observations impose themselves when we compare these directories, and these confirm themselves when we look more broadly.

First of all, lots and lots of libraries are actively publishing. Many dozens of U.S. academic and public libraries report some devotion of staff time to publishing activities. This is true for the rest of the world as well, though not as well documented.

Second, not a lot of clear activity patterns emerge, though we found that libraries have long been publishers of materials from or about their collections. To be sure, today’s leading *form* of publishing activity is broader than that: the creation and management of institution-based repositories holding material produced within the home institution. Even there, the diversity of what enters into these repositories is great, the differences of scale are huge, and most are still in barely nascent stages. If there is a second most common form of activity, it consists of digitizing analog materials held by the library’s collections or archives for a wider audience — and then the diversity of such objects chosen is immense.

What we’ve learned from this study is that the diversity is good and it is a source for optimism. There are in fact many possibilities in front of libraries, and many of those possibilities will, I am certain, prove to be profitable and useful for us and for our libraries’ users.

But what also struck us is that the ordinary discussions of library publishers generally omit what seems an absolutely essential function: let’s call it marketing.

If you write your amazingly compelling scholarly work (or even a murder mystery) and self-publish it all by yourself, perhaps even using **Amazon’s** self-publishing service, you have in some sense “published” it, yes. But if no one notices, then your deathless prose becomes the tree that falls noiseless in the forest. What that means is that publishing is not just a matter of reproducing and making available copies of an article or book. The reason you would want your great American novel published by a “real publisher” has much to do with the ability of the traditional publisher to make your work known to the audience that might be moved to read it.

When we look at the current landscape of library publishing, the kind of marketing that facilitates making an audience for the works that get published is much harder to find than the brute fact of publication itself. I suspect that the most important prospects for library publishing will be strongly shaped by the ability of libraries to find channels for making their work readily known to the audiences they seek to reach. Our *advice* for libraries thinking of engaging substantially in this area is to remember to focus a significant piece of your energy on this marketing side of the activity. You don’t want your tree to fall unheard.

The discussion about publishing roles for libraries will continue and thrive. At the upcoming **Charleston Conference**, **Alex** will lead a concurrent session on this topic. The **LPC** has already announced its 2016 conference for May 2016 at the **University of North Texas**. **IFLA’s** Acquisition and Collection Development Section has started planning for a one-and-a-half day pre-conference prior to the Columbus, OH-based **IFLA Congress**. The satellite event will be held at the **University of Michigan** campus. I’ll head up the ACD side of the process, with enthusiastic and collegial partnership from the **UM Library**, in particular **Charles Watkinson** and some of his colleagues. This will be an opportunity to hear global perspectives and case studies, which have been thin on the ground in a so-far largely U.S./Anglo-based discourse. But, even if you can’t attend any of the aforementioned meetings, do enrich your own understanding of library publishing issues and developments by reading the report. And join in this new role for libraries! 🌱

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