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Dust Jackets to Dust?

by **John Sherer** (Director, University of North Carolina Press) <john.sherer@uncpress.org>



The first LP I ever bought was **Queen's** *News of the World*. I remember flipping through a bin of records and coming across that absurdly illustrated, gate-folded album. I had no idea what to expect from it musically, but the cover compelled me to buy it. I literally discovered the music of **Queen** because of the cover art. Three decades later, my daughter discovered **Queen** through a Spotify playlist.

The dust cover of a book is a sacred concept where I work at the **University of North Carolina Press**. The halls still echo with the memory and works of the legendary book designer **Rich Hendel**. Our Press library is a cathedral, celebrating the art of the printed book. Each volume can be pulled from the shelf and handled, and the designed cover is the first step in a careful revealing of the contents and audiences the author and Press worked hard to capture. Scanning the densely lined shelves, it's hard to visualize a better representation of nearly ten decades of publishing.

But for some university press books, we should have an honest conversation about the costs and benefits of continuing to design and print covers.

Our most scholarly books — the ones we exist to publish — are simply no longer being discovered the way they were a generation ago. People frequently refer to the 60s and 70s as the glory days for university press publishing, and from an economic perspective, that is almost certainly true. There was a reliable and recurring standing order program from libraries for well-published humanities monographs. Scholars descended on publishers' exhibits at academic conferences to browse and purchase our new releases and classic backlist titles. They would frequently leave the exhibit hall with bags full of discounted books as they built their collections. Professors assigned stacks of our books as secondary reading for their students who bought and then held on to them as the beginnings of their own libraries. It's easy to see why publishers would miss those salad days.

But truth is that from a dissemination and preservation perspective, that era had major flaws. While we were printing up to a thousand copies of these volumes, our dissemination strategy was limited to placing them into the most elite institutions on the planet. Our marketing campaigns were targeting a highly privileged clientele. For all but the most exceptional titles, the library purchases were most likely one day to be de-accessioned and ultimately placed in a black garbage sack out back next to the dumpster bin. When the print run ran out in our warehouse, frequently the books went out of print. We have an employee at the Press today who spends most of her time "republishing" those books we supposedly published so well.

The ensuing decades have not been particularly kind to university presses. A gradual but

steady decline in university support combined with sustained reductions in library collection development budgets have squeezed most print runs into a number somewhere between a speed limit and a batting average. And there's no indication that there will be an upward inflection point on this asymptotic decline.

But even facing these economic headwinds, we are actually doing a much better job now of meeting our mission and goals. We're bringing high quality scholarship to our largest audiences ever. The formats are easily discovered, shared, and reused. And it is all because of our ability to make our titles available in digital formats.

The merits of digital formats are well known and obvious — lower incremental production costs and more easily preserved formats. But we're also on the cusp of a heightened utility for our books. A generation ago, scholars perhaps read reviews of them, or saw them at a conference, or discovered them in a visit to the library stacks. But the book was still something the scholar sought out on its own after they made a deliberate decision to use books in their research. As we build tools to code our manuscripts and link their texts to larger bodies of digitized humanities scholarship, our books can now potentially be surfaced any time a scholar anywhere is doing computer-based research.

This is because more and more scholars are beginning their research digitally.¹ They still want print when it comes time to engage deeply, but by the time they're ready for print, they've already decided they're going to obtain the book. Which means the design of the cover almost certainly wasn't a factor in their decision to read the book. Gone are the days of satchels of purchases at conferences. Gone are the serendipitous discoveries in the library stacks. Gone are the moments of browsing a bookstore's shelves. In all those searches, an intelligent and carefully planned cover with a compelling design and marketing text could make the difference in whether the book might get read or not. Now we are all starting our searches on our keyboards. Our "browsing" is done via a digital platform. We are learning about new books through social sharing on the web. Which means a scholarly publisher with finite resources (is there any other kind?) should be investing more in SEO (search engine optimization) and robust metadata, and less on a striking design.

The ever-present challenge of limited resources triggers the question of how much it costs to put a cover on a book. The physical manufacturing cost is easiest to express. For a standard hardcover book, printing and wrapping a cover usually costs at least \$1 per copy. It's less for a paperback, although the difference between a four-color cover and a duotone one still runs in the hundreds of dollars. There's frequently a cost for permissions for

an image. Some requests are in the thousands of dollars, but most publishers try to limit them to the hundreds of dollars. But these costs are only the tip of the iceberg. The real costs for a publisher aren't the manufacturing or permissions — it's the internal time spent creating the cover design in the first place.

The process frequently looks like this:

- A solicitation is sent to the author asking whether they have an image or concept in mind.
- The concept is usually discussed at a seasonal launch meeting attended by a significant percentage of the marketing, editorial, and design staffs.
- An internal team (usually representing both marketing and editorial) reviews the launch and author's ideas and forwards them with a charge to the design department.
- A good designer spends some time with the manuscript to make sure they have a sense for the author's voice and intended audience. They review the book's art program for ideas and frequently do more image and permissions research.
- Then they begin creating completely original designs from scratch. Usually rough designs are bounced off other members of the department or a design director, who suggests further improvements.
- The cover is then ready to be circulated internally within the publishing house. Acquisitions, copyediting, sales, publicity, and the director will all be asked to review, comment on, and approve a design.
- Then the design is shared with the author whose feedback is incorporated.
- Finally, a full printer-ready pdf of the full mechanical is prepared and circulated (again) internally for approval.

In the best-case scenario, this is all a linear process. But when you consider that there are thousands of new monographs published every year, it's not hard to imagine that there are hundreds of times where this process is derailed and steps are revisited.

The **Ithaka** study on the costs of monographs² creates a methodology to help us calculate these costs. The process I've described above probably involves between 20-30 hours of staff time for a standard book. It's more for ones where the process is less linear and more recursive. But for a standard book, if you use

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a very rough calculator of \$50/hour (recalling that many freelance designers charge at \$100/hour) the staff time probably costs between \$1,000-\$1,500 per book. Tack on the permissions (\$300 on a good day) and printing and wrapping costs for a 400 copy print run, and we've now racked up \$1,700-\$2,200 in costs per title. We tell ourselves that the designed cover is meant to increase sales, but by this math, it adds up to \$5 to the price of each copy we sell.

A mid-sized university press might publish nearly 100 books a year so the dollars add up quickly. The prevailing economic trends are forcing publishers to look at every dollar they spend. When you combine this with the growing realization that discoverability is more about digital tools and less about individuals handling the physical volume, it challenges the conventional wisdom of how we allocate resources.

Many of us are now dramatically increasing the digital discoverability of our books by creating chapter level abstracts and indexes. We're at the first days of encoding texts with electronic tagging allowing them to be immersed and scanned within large bodies of humanities scholarship. These activities are time consuming and expensive for a publisher, but they will ultimately allow our books to be found and used much more effectively. The challenge is that we have to find a way to pay for these costs.

The designed book cover has always been about discoverability, and for many books we publish it will remain a key feature. A well-designed cover distinctly signals to the reader an indication of what it is they're holding in their hand as well as the investment the publisher is making in the work. But for our most scholarly books, where the economic pressure is overwhelming and where the discoverability patterns are rapidly shifting to digital, the dust cover is one of the most visible relics of an obsolete system — but it is by no means the only one. There are also the costs of designing interior pages; the costs of storage, supply-chain management, and obsolescence; QA associated with manufacturing; and the significant overhead needed at a press to manage cost recovery.

Presses need to accept the growing truth that for a growing percentage of our high-end scholarly output, the traditional tools of market-based cost-recovery are becoming more and more nonsensical and indefensible. Once we begin shifting our resources to reflect this reality, the result could be a new golden era of unprecedented output, dissemination, and access. 🐾

Endnotes

1. <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/ithaka-sr-us-faculty-survey-2015/>
2. <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/the-costs-of-publishing-monographs/>

Making Connections, Building Community

by Kathryn Conrad (Director, University of Arizona Press)
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In 2010, the University of Arizona Press published *La Calle: Spatial Conflicts and Urban Renewal in a Southwestern City* by Lydia Otero. The book, which was widely and well-reviewed, is an important contribution to the history of urban renewal in the United States and to our understanding of structures of power, racism, resistance, and historical memory. In particular, this book speaks to the history of the place where we live. It details the history of the urban renewal projects that razed eighty acres of land in downtown Tucson, land that was deemed blighted by the growth lobby but which was a vibrant community to Mexican American families who lived there, in the most densely populated space in the state of Arizona. This history was one of the first things I learned about my new community upon moving to Tucson in the mid-1990s. Though three decades in the past, the destruction of the space that represented the beating heart of Tucson's Mexican American community remained an open wound for many in our diverse community.

La Calle is a scholarly monograph — a book written by a scholar to expand the scholarly record — but Otero's research has special meaning for our own community. As is our custom for books with special significance to a particular community, especially our own, our marketing department planned a book launch. Such public events create opportunities for media attention as well as unique sales opportunities. They may be held at bookstores, libraries, museums, or other venues. They build awareness of a new book, generate sales, and honor the culmination of the author's work.

And so, on a warm fall day in 2010, we celebrated the publication of *La Calle* at a Mexican restaurant in Barrio Hollywood, not far from the Tucson Convention Center and the already-failing office complex called **La Placita Village** that was built where La Calle once was home to 1,000 residents. More than 100 people gathered at the celebration, many from families who had been displaced by Tucson's efforts at urban renewal. Attendees scanned the book's index for names of their friends and family members who had been interviewed as part of Otero's research. Speakers highlighted the significance of the book. Food and memories were shared. In this festive atmosphere, the community gave a collective "thank you" to the author for documenting their story.

Occasions such as these are some of our proudest moments as university press publishers. While book sales and awards are signs of success for a publisher and citations and reviews are signs of success for an author,

those metrics don't measure the full impact of a book. Making scholarship available and discoverable is not the same as making it known and putting it into people's hands. Most of the attendees at our book launch for *La Calle* were not scholars, but they are people for whom scholarship matters.

La Calle took root in our community. Beginning with that book launch, it became a book that was talked about and referred to not just in academic circles, but among Tucson locals and newcomers alike. It became a touch-point in dialogue around new urban renewal efforts to succeed those of decades past that were widely deemed as failures. Six years after publication, it inspired a community collaboration called the Barrio Stories Project. Working with ethnographers from the University of Arizona's Bureau for Applied Research, nine youth-scholars conducted interviews with former residents of the demolished neighborhood,

which became a script at the hands of three award-winning playwrights working with Dr. Otero as historical consultant. In March of 2016, the **Borderlands Theater** produced a theatrical event in which audience members gathered on the outdoor plaza of the **Tucson Convention Center**, the site of La Calle, to be led through the

actual spaces where this history occurred as actors brought communal memories to life. This unique form of public history and civic dialogue will be long remembered and the students' oral histories are preserved online at BarrioStories.org.

Marketing books is part of our mission. Beyond promoting sales, our brand of marketing, especially visible in stories such as the launch of *La Calle*, extends scholarship in ways that are both subtle and profound. When we help scholars share their work with indigenous communities with which they collaborate, we are aiding the work of decolonization. When we secure interviews for academic authors, feature stories for their books, and spots on panels at major book festivals, we are expanding the reach and impact of their work. We are connecting the academy to the community. As our mission statement says, "We advance the University of Arizona's mission by connecting scholarship and creative expression to readers worldwide." University presses serve a unique role in translating the work of the academy to the world at large. Scholarship is for everyone and universities, especially land grant universities like the **University of Arizona**, are for the people.

As scholarship moves to a digital environment, this very human kind of marketing

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