

Publisher-Library Relations: What Assets Does a University Press Bring to the Partnership?

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You've heard the question: How can you say that the future is so hard to predict when all of my worst fears are coming true? Given slippery and evolving nature of scholarly communication, that question hits a little too close to home. University presses stand by helplessly as monograph sales evaporate, while, ironically, the pressure on scholars to publish increases. Print collection budgets drain toward electronic resources especially as storage space diminishes and user behavior changes. And new trends in scholarly communication have everyone scrambling for new business models, new delivery models, new models that respond to the new user behavior. Our worst fears seem to be coming true. In one bright corner in this otherwise dark room shines the potential for university presses and libraries to work together to address these issues. As libraries seek inroads into publishing services, partnerships between presses and libraries have emerged as one accepted — yet inchoate — model for the future. Successful library-publisher cooperation depends in part on each bringing assets to the union and on appreciating that each possesses strengths and weaknesses. This piece asks: What assets do university presses bring to the library-publisher partnership, and how might these interface with a university library's strategic vision?

I won't argue that university presses and university libraries need to cooperate; implicitly or explicitly, that decision has already been made. Neither will I reveal a secret recipe for success. I'll leave such alchemy to others. I do know that once a library and a publisher decide to work together, however, they may quickly find themselves stumbling over what cooperation entails, what issues should be addressed, and how to accomplish a mutual objective. At the core, however, libraries and publishers must begin the journey with a shared commitment to the central mission of their university to disseminate scholarly knowledge and information to the widest possible audience for the least amount of money. Both seek sustainable — if often conflicting — financial models for fulfilling their mission in the face of radical shifts in scholarly communication.

Framing my comments around a controlling question doesn't mean I have empirical solutions to concrete problems. Rather, I can share what I've learned from working for **Penn State University's Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing**. Neither should inferences be drawn that a press's assets on one side of the line offset a library's liabilities on the other. This is not a double-entry bookkeeping problem. In this essay I focus only on three, interrelated assets; many others exist:¹ (1) Quid pro quo: networks and relationships with scholarly researchers; (2) external versus internal: the ability to disseminate information and knowledge; (3) branding the university.

Quid pro quo: Networks and Relationships with Scholarly Researchers

Whether you consider academic publishing “noble gambling” or “madness,” it would be hard to deny that successful scholarly publishing relies upon relationships. Publishing has been and remains relational. Publishing houses of almost any stripe construct their reputations and their lists by courting the best authors, hiring knowledgeable editors who relate to authors at eye-level, and cementing those connections by publishing well-crafted volumes. Whether the work analyzes the orthography of the classical Greek digamma or reviews the eating habits of Charles Dickens' characters in *A Christmas Carol*, scholarly publishing relies upon relationships between the scholar and the publisher concerning the quality (peer review), focus (list development) and delivery (dissemination) of scholarly content.

Publishers and authors have fashioned symbiotic connections: *I need a book : you need promotion or tenure*. This is not disingenuous quid pro quo; it accomplishes more than serving both: it also ensures the flow of tested and verified scholarly knowledge and information, i.e., peer-reviewed scholarship. The so-called *Ithaka Report* terms this “credentialing.” In any case, early in the digital race we learned that having the potential to disseminate content is not always enough.² Yes anyone with an Internet connection can discover an entire world of knowledge. But academic content — especially in the humanities and social sciences — needs to bear the imprimatur of the academy both to authenticate the value of the information for the user and to validate the researcher's credentials behind the work. The publisher brings to the library-publisher partnership pre-existing relationships (i.e., networks) that verify the reliability, originality, and value of the content. Publishers, via the peer-review system, thus assay academic research for both the user and the creator; moreover, and fundamentally, they also confirm the reliability of the work to the universities who invest in their faculties' careers. If the library-publisher cooperative wants to certify the value of its content for both the creators and the users, then presses, whose principal relationships look outwardly to the larger academic community rather than inwardly to the campus community, are in the better position to establish peer-review systems to acquire, assess, and validate the content.

Another relational aspect of publishing is mirrored in a press's list. Publishers' list-building — a key feature of successful publishing — demands that publishers, relative to their size, create an identity. So, a publisher limits its areas of interest. For example, one press may not publish in art history at all. Another

doesn't just publish in art history, it specializes in European art history; and not just any European art, but in Spanish Golden Age art. By focusing on niches that mirror its acquisition editors' strengths and relationships, the press builds unique and lasting networks in that field, whether editor, author, reader, reviewer, critic, blurber, board-member, or contributor. Focusing a list also streamlines a press's program by permitting scale. It uses fewer resources for niche markets instead of spreading budgets thinly across a wide range. Would libraries benefit from thinking “niche” themselves as they develop as publishing entities? Put another way, should libraries focus on providing a few focused services well rather than providing a broad suite of services? And would university libraries and presses profit from talking with one another about these service and publishing niches to ensure that emerging underserved areas continue to be served and areas of duplication are minimized? Unequivocally. Over time a press will have developed numerous orbits where it is known and where it knows the researchers. This does not happen overnight, but it may happen over drinks. Such social networking figures prominently in a press's ability to garner and authenticate scholarly content. This also means that acquisitions editors stand on the front lines when it comes to content development. By learning about, evaluating, and taking the pulse of the larger academy, the best editors even help shape new scholarly trends, methods, and theories. A well-crafted series devoted to an emerging methodology is but one telltale sign of an editor's hand; but that editor needs to have built relationships with scholars to establish that series. In the publisher-library partnership, the publisher's assets — a network of scholars, the power to credential, the ability to identify underserved and emerging areas of research, and the ability to create niches — strengthen any cooperative effort.

External versus Internal: The Ability to Disseminate Information and Knowledge

A few years ago it would have been tempting to complete the heading above with the phrase, “better than libraries,” but that is simply not the case any more. At least compared with most university presses, libraries have done a better job of implementing and adapting technology to get information and knowledge into the hands of their end user. Thus virtually anyone with an Internet connection can access a library's digital resources, 24/7. But — and it's a big *but* — university and especially research library resources remain off the radar for the nonspecialist, and even many specialists. Libraries have skillfully marketed to their communities, their campuses, their end user. Their audience, however, differs dramatically from

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the university press whose principal market is not within the university but outside of it. This may partially explain why university presses are not always regarded as standing at the center of a university's mission. Presses look outwardly, not inwardly, both in terms of the content they acquire and in terms of their audience. The temptation to see "marketing" as somehow "commercial" — an epithet of the worst kind, and therefore not desirable — risks terminal myopia. Today's users scour the bandwidths for information, and libraries and presses need to maximize our efforts to help them discover it. University publishers have both industry savvy about these markets and established partners for distributing authenticated information to the world at large. To reach this external market university presses have established channels for distributing not only the information and knowledge per se, but the metadata surrounding that content. Rich metadata allows discovery outside of the university's walls.³ Publishers have established business relationships with partners who direct content not only to libraries but also to retail channels. Much of this is made possible by rich data feeds that extend a publisher's reach into nontraditional library markets. For example, our university press's Website gets nearly 40,000 hits each month, the majority not from within the university. We have identified this as an opportunity to market our library to those external customers by posting links to the library's digital Pennsylvania collection on pages devoted to our regional publishing program. This should pay off in the library's having more "external" visitors to their site. By playing upon this publisher asset, the publisher-library collaboration can extend its outreach and serve an even wider constituency.

Branding the University

The university press as the public face of the university may not outstrip the power of the last-second touchdown or three-point buzzer beater, but because university presses look outwardly rather than inwardly, and because they have developed through the credentialing process a kind of "street cred," presses uniquely convey the overall scholarly integrity and quality of a university. Presses have also branded themselves by how they have developed their lists. Presses are known for publishing *x*, *y*, or *z*. Ironically a press does this not by publish-



ing the work of the insider, the faculty of the home institution; rather, the press extends its brand and that of the parent university into the academic arena precisely by its role as arbiter and authenticator of scholarly content created at other institutions. This power of university presses argues forcefully that universities, rather than diminishing their commitments to their presses, must support presses and ensure that the press's mission and values mirror those of the university and the university library.⁴

Presses therefore represent the university and complement the university's brand with consistent, vetted, and focused publishing.⁵ Branding helps the university and university library to compete — yes compete — for a place in scholarly communication outside the university's walls.⁶ One nexus for branding at Penn State occurs in regional publishing. For example, the library collects resources on Pennsylvania. The press, similarly, enhances the university's identity to citizens in general by publishing information about Penn-

sylvania. When users access content from either the press or the library, they can be confident that behind it stands the university's commitment to scholarship. Strengthening brand recognition, however, cannot fall simply on the shoulders of either the press or the library, and much labor remains to create a common brand identity. Universities must see in that partnership an opportunity to create a consistent and vibrant identity that matches the strategic goals of the university.

I addressed here only a few of the many assets that university presses bring to the publisher-library partnership. As to how these assets contribute to the university's strategic mission, the answer is clear. Presses may not always fulfill the mission of their universities in dramatic fashion, but the results are no less essential. Presses keep the machinery of academe working, as they maintain networks to create, authenticate, and credential scholars. They disseminate scholarly knowledge and enrich any library-publisher collaboration by reaching outwardly to a global community. Moreover, presses help brand a university. Together these assets strengthen the publisher-library partnership and will help them fulfill their shared strategic goals and mission. 🌳

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against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: A ton of places.

EARLY LIFE: Military brat.

FAMILY: A 27-year-old, wonderful daughter, **Courtney**, and my partner **Stephanie**, a professor at **Hofstra University**. Two cats and two dogs between us.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Blues harmonica, all kinds of music, kayak fishing, and cooking.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *A River Runs Through It*.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Whiners and drivers on cell phones.

PHILOSOPHY: Never trust a philosophy.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Haven't had one yet.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Getting my exwife remarried.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Unlike anything we think it will be, but basically digital, digital, digital. An overhaul of the peer-review system will be essential; commercial publishers in humanities and social sciences will retrench. 🌳

Endnotes

1. A useful appendix in **L. Brown, R. Griffiths, M. Rascoff**, "University Publishing in a Digital Age" (pp. 36–37; aka the "*Ithaka Report*") lists respective strengths and weaknesses of presses and libraries. The overlap of my list is conspicuous.
2. Early in the history of MIT's DSpace (ca. 2001–2002) faculty were reluctant to post their material because of concerns that doing so could affect their ability to publish in journals (48%). Only 14% however were worried about P&T, but that may be because they preferred formal publication (50%) and were hesitant to give any distribution rights to MIT (46%). **M. R. Barton, J. H. Walker**, "*MIT Libraries' DSpace Business Plan Project: Final Report to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation*" (2002, p. 30).
3. For example, the **University of Tennessee Libraries** new digital imprint, **Newfound Press**, capitalizes on the ability of the **University of Tennessee Press** to sell and distribute POD editions of its new OA monograph series (<http://www.newfoundpress.utk.edu/>).
4. A common conclusion drawn from the *Ithaka Report* echoes the need for universities to recommit to their presses. The sentiment is underscored by **Candee and Withey's** study as well.
5. Author **James Axtell** recounts the late president of **Princeton Robert F. Goheen's** fondness for "the story of when he was introduced to a scholar in New Delhi as the president of **Princeton**, the Indian said 'Oh, very interesting. And does that university have any connection with Princeton University Press?'" (*The Making of Princeton University: From Woodrow Wilson to the Present* [Princeton: Princeton, 2006], 564).
6. The notion of getting a leg up on one's competition is fundamental to branding. See, for example, how this relates to libraries, "Identify Your Brand Before You Market," *Information Outlook* 6 (11, 2002) <http://www.sla.org/content/Shop/Information/infoonline/2002/nov02/identbrand.cfm>.