

Ellen W. Faran

Sustaining scholarly publishing

University presses and emerging business models

Among scholarly publishers, university presses stand out because of their commitment to the broad dissemination of quality works at reasonable prices. Among academic units of universities, university presses stand out because they have traditionally operated as businesses, with far greater reliance on product sales than on subsidized funding.

And in contrast to academic libraries that serve the comprehensive needs of the faculty and students at their home institutions, university presses serve selected needs—for published works within their disciplines of focus—of authors and readers across the global academic community. Naturally these characteristics inform how university presses are evolving as scholarly communication goes digital.

How *are* university presses evolving today, and how are they thinking about the future? The Association of American University Presses (AAUP) recently appointed a taskforce to investigate these questions. (Please note that, while I served on the taskforce, this article reflects my own views, not those of its members.)

The taskforce's report "Sustaining Scholarly Publishing: New Business Models for University Presses" was just released this March.¹

The report includes a roundup of new business model activities already underway in the university press community. The extent of this activity was eye-opening even for those of us involved in parts of it; we hope that our partners in scholarly communication will also find it informative and stimulating.

Sustain what?

A good starting place for this inquiry was to consider: what exactly should be sustained? Some aspects of past or present university press publishing practices have no place in our future programs or workflows. Presses are open to transformative change; they grasp its inevitability and recognize its potential. Yet certain elements of our work, we believe, are absolutely critical to the healthy dissemination of scholarship. These must be preserved as scholarly publishing moves forward.

The taskforce identified a range of essential university press functions that might be grouped into two categories: ensuring and signifying quality (selection, editorial engagement, imprimatur, independence) and promoting broad readership (metadata, promotion, print distribution, licensing, managing digital formats, and nurturing a long-term program). By way of encouraging conversation, the report offers questions about how these functions may remain integrated into the overall process as new support models for presses are developed.

What new models?

For most university presses, the shift to digital means layering on digital publishing for books while continuing to publish

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print editions through traditional market channels (a process that several of us have already undertaken for journals). At least as of the spring of 2011, this shift has not yet made its way to the marketplace for books. We hear clearly from librarians their preference for digital books, and the university press community is responding by making more titles more available through a variety of programs.

So it is possible that the institutional market will undergo a dramatic transformation just in the next two years. But at least for now, faculty and students seem to prefer print. Certainly most authors strenuously resist e-only publication strategies for their own work. The constituency served by university presses remains firmly in need of both print and digital publications.

Starting in the fall of 2009, the taskforce surveyed the directors of the AAUP member presses seeking “new model” activities. The activities were then summarized in the report under four general categories:

- open digital plus paid print,
- open access (usually through institutional support),
- paid digital (e-books), and
- new digital projects (beyond books and journals).

The report outlines open initiatives at many presses, generally thanks to hosting services and digitization provided by university libraries. It would be spectacular for all of us if open online dissemination of content could be supported by print sales—if the revenue from print sales would be sufficient to support the publishers’ work in developing and marketing the work despite the open availability of full text. Unfortunately, all evidence suggests that this model does not work and in fact is decreasing in effectiveness as digital reading is increasingly adopted. Caution is advised in drawing conclusions from early examples where open posting did not appear to significantly hurt print sales; these may be no longer relevant depending on the extent of the switch in reading behavior

in the particular discipline from print to online and e-reading devices.

We are early in the development of effective channels for e-books. University presses are eager to make their content available to both individuals and institutions “when and as they want it” but have to face some serious challenges about how to do this sustainably. Concerns include consumer expectations around low prices for e-content, unsettled file format requirements of third-party vendors, and the implications of networked purchases for lower unit sales. Many university presses are proceeding to join new e-book collections despite the very real risk of significant reductions in unit sales (of either print or e-book editions).

Two-to-three years from now we will all understand a lot more about how libraries are buying university press e-books. Some e-book collections will offer title by title as well as collection purchasing options, perpetual access purchase or subscription options, and an evolving assortment of subject area collections. Usage metrics or patron driven acquisitions for some libraries will have an impact on their purchasing patterns over time. Some librarians tell us that they will immediately drop print purchases once e-books are available and others that they will continue with print at the same level. Major efforts are underway to consolidate print holdings and expand interlibrary loan. It is hard to imagine that the total sales of university press titles will not be reduced by these new dynamics. Specifically, sales to individual scholars may be reduced as robust platforms containing comprehensive collections of e-books are available to them 24/7. And certainly sales of books assigned or recommended to students in courses may decline, as well.

The taskforce report does not directly address questions of costs and the cost structure of university presses, but it describes new models that have significant cost implications. It seems clear that the e-only portion of our new world will be

small, at least in the short term. Most digital publishing will continue to be accompanied by print editions (with the exception for rich media content that has no print equivalent).

Even if print gradually shrinks for major segments of our program, producing and distributing print editions will be part of our activities—and important for our authors and readers—for many years. The unit cost of a print title includes a pro rata share of the fixed cost of setting up the press so that it costs more per unit to print small quantities than large. We are moving into a smaller and smaller print quantity world.

As I noted earlier, new digital processes are being added to publishers' existing operations, while we continue to manufacture print editions. We are adding new fixed costs for preparing digital editions and wrangling files (content asset management) without subtracting the fixed costs formerly associated solely with print, and new overhead costs without being able to subtract much existing overhead. The "costs to first copy" (including copyediting, design, typesetting, proofreading) are still fully necessary regardless of whether the final edition is print or digital or both.

Managing transitions

It seems pretty clear that most new business models for university presses will involve more open content and more subsidized funding. Ironically, exploring these models involves even more risk-taking for presses because such exploration usually involves giving up an established revenue stream in favor of uncertain author fees or term-limited subventions.

A university press takes seriously the responsibility for the long-term asset that is its imprint—and brings appropriate caution to experiments that have implications for its core financial stability. This does not mean that we resist change; rather that we take a long-term perspective and honor our accumulated responsibilities to authors, customers, and readers.

When we make decisions about e-books, for example, we must imagine a future (far different from today) where e-book revenues are a major contributor to our sustainability. Neither digital publishing nor open access publishing can be seen as "incremental" if they are about to be "core."

The taskforce report notes that making the transition from one business model to another is a complex process, one that often requires bridge funding. Author expectations are a significant factor, and faculty support can be essential to the success of new models at a discipline or subdiscipline level.

Perhaps most important is the recognition that we have already moved from a world of a single business model to a world of multiple, shifting models. This gives presses a significantly more complex management task as their programs become a portfolio of experimental, new, and established businesses.

Beyond release of the report

Naturally, the specific snapshot of university press activities provided in this report was out of date before the report was released; this adds weight to the report's recommendation for a continually updated central conduit of such information. I should note the significant progress made on the university press e-book front as of this writing. The first half of 2012 will bring the launch of multi-publisher e-book products from two major press collaborations: Books at JSTOR and the University Press Content Consortium (UPCC). (UPCC was formed in mid-March 2011 by the merger of Project MUSE Editions and the University Press e-book Consortium.)

These initiatives will offer new opportunities for libraries to purchase university press titles in electronic editions on distinctly library-friendly usage terms. At least some titles have been newly digitized and will be making their e-book debut in these collections. Both UPCC and Books at JSTOR will offer frontlist e-books without an

embargo after print publication; for many presses, this will be their first experience with simultaneous release. Other university press collections are underway also, such as those respectively of Cambridge and Oxford University Presses.

The report was posted in a MediaCommons edition (an AAUP first)² and has provoked some lively response from librarians, university administrators, and university press staff. Some comments add new ideas or examples or expand on the complexity of the issues discussed.

Others reveal significant skepticism about the capacity of university presses to embrace fully a more open and format-unbounded future. In my personal view, this open exchange feels like an exciting step forward into the healthy dialogue that we have long desired.

University presses share so much common ground with academic libraries. This includes supporting faculty research, writ-

ing, and teaching, and valuing the quality, accessibility, and usefulness of published work.

It is only natural that today's engagement of both presses and libraries with new technologies and new methods of dissemination is informed by our respective legacy business models (which are strikingly different). These different perspectives are exciting because of how much we can learn from each other and accomplish together.

I hope that you will find the AAUP taskforce report helpful as one small step in advancing the conversation.

Notes

1. "Sustaining Scholarly Publishing: New Business Models for University Presses," www.aaupnet.org/resources/reports/business_models/index.html.
2. mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/sustaining. *ZZ*

("Secrets to successful mystery shopping," cont. from page 276)

sors then met with the staff to review the results. Successes were celebrated and areas for improvement were identified.

At Longwood University, the desk supervisor decided to use the mystery shopping reports as part of the staff evaluation process. Such a move entailed adjusting the staff member's work description to include customer service as a responsibility and mystery shopping as a measure of progress.

Conclusion

Based on our studies, we conclude that mystery shopping is an accurate and efficient method to measure existing service at library service points. Used iteratively, it provides cyclical feedback as one pinpoints areas for improvement, provides training, repeats the mystery shopping process, and determines if shoppers report staff behaviors that meet established expectations. Mystery shopping is not productive as a mechanism to "spy on"

or "catch" employees misbehaving. Instead, a sound mystery shopping program is a team effort that includes all stakeholders in a process that leads to improved interpersonal communication between our public service staff and patrons.

Notes

1. J. D. Durrance, "Factors That Influence Reference Success: What Makes Questioners Willing to Return," *Reference Librarian* 23 (1995): 243–65.
2. T. Van der Wiele, M. Hesselink, J. Van Iwaarden, "Mystery shopping: A tool to develop insight into customer service provision," *Total Quality Management* 16 (2000):529–41.
3. "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers," accessed January 6, 2011, www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral.cfm. *ZZ*