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Reimagining the University Press: A Checklist for Scholarly Publishers

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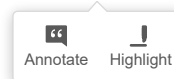
Abstract

A university press director argues that presses can successfully reimagine their role as publishers by innovating notably in two realms: First, in content, by developing and publishing new kinds of scholarly books to complement the traditional research monograph, especially in groundbreaking academic fields; and second, by embracing new technologies designed to make these publications more discoverable, searchable, and readable, and thereby more central to the global scholarly conversation. Achieving this goal will require a more purposeful culture of consultation between presses and their governing institutions, across the university press and publishing community at large, and especially within presses—where communication between and across functional departments (editorial, production, marketing, etc.) will be vital in leveraging technological advances in the interest of more effective and exciting publishing.

Plenary sessions of the American Association of University Presses meetings these past few years, it strikes me, must be a little like the great church councils of bygone days. The technological issues discussed at our convocations tend to be of millennial change—our equivalent of the Reformation. The talk among us is all about disruption, direction, and strategy, just as it was among the council prelates who grappled with epochal challenges of the day in their Latin disputations. Just for the record, I managed to miss the sixteenth-century Council of Trent but was a boy during the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s, and recall well its revolutionary echoes.

My own contribution to the neoecclesiastical discussion regarding the future of university presses appeared last year in an article I published in the *Chronicle Review* titled, "A Manifesto for Scholarly Publishing [http://chronicle.com/article/A-Manifesto-for-Scholarly/44462/] ". In it, I presented my case: Scholarly books still matter, perhaps more than ever. If university presses are to thrive, we must in the first place be bold in the realm of content: diversify our publishing into new and robust fields, publish new and different kinds of scholarly books, and gear our publishing more fully for international as well as domestic readerships. In a scholarly culture marked by the ever-finer splintering of communications and by the inexorable growth of more specialized microconversations, university presses play an increasingly important role by publishing books that both synthesize these atomized ideas and unify those fragmented conversations, within as well as across fields. Although our books will be discovered, read, and discussed on a panoply of sites and devices, they will be judged by the originality and quality of their content, just as they are in print. So, the big challenge for presses is to innovate with content even as we adapt with distribution. That's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

However, two AAUP Councils of Trent and several smaller convocations later, I've decided I've done my share of Latinate disputation and am now feeling the need for tactics and practicality. So, with a nod to Atul Gawande, author of *The Checklist Manifesto*, and a wink toward Phil Pochoda, editor of this issue who invited this contribution, I have opted to offer the following workaday checklist as to how to we might begin to reimagine the university press.

Point 1. Better engage, and care for, our authors. As the leader of a prominent international university press said recently, the most important element in our "sustainability" is to remain attuned to the scholars whose academic writings serve as the basis for our books. Without them, we are lost. So, we've got to "double down" our efforts to stay abreast of the changing shape of scholarly production, just as we help to guide it. Editorially, our work is cut out for us. But this appeal pertains to content as well as delivery. On the latter, it is incumbent upon us to work with our authors to devise new ways of editing, designing, illustrating, and publishing their books, and to using the emerging technologies for better integrating them into scholarly conversation.

An important step in this regard is to work with our authors to make their books live on the web through the development of book and series-specific sites that capture the reviews, debates, and discussions that surround their work and exploit the new technologies that enrich these conversations. Of course, much of this is already happening spontaneously, but the development of the semantic web will provide authors and publishers with new opportunities for improving the search, discoverability, and discussion of our books. Institutionalizing this curatorial activity will be a challenge for authors and publishers working together, and a prime opportunity for us to reimagine the role of the university press.

Point 2. Embrace the global marketplace of readers. It's vital that we restructure our publishing—notably, editorial acquisitions, but also publicity and marketing—to engage readers all over the world. The number of college and university-educated young people, especially throughout Asia, is rising and, as a journalism foundation executive mentioned to me recently, the number of newspaper readers in the developing world is actually *increasing* because literacy rates are going up. Technology has made reaching these audiences vastly easier and less expensive than it was a decade ago. Creating a global conversation about a new book through effective publicity is often as easy as mounting a blog post. For example, at Princeton, we have made a special effort to identify and cultivate columnists, producers, and editors throughout the world in the interest of publicizing our science titles, and have sustained our connection to these new partners both through direct correspondence and through our social networking activities. We call this initiative *Princeton Global Science*, and it emanates from our website in the form of a weekly sub-blog. And to the extent that we do succeed in reaching global audiences, sales of our books—print and digital—have expanded. Reimagining the university press thus means publishing globally and, more to the point, using all the emerging information technology to develop our connections with readers and writers around the world.

Point 3. Adopt an editorially driven growth plan. Even in its putative reimagined incarnation, inspired university press publishing begins and ends with excellent lists. Editors need to serve both the scholarly reputation and the economic well-being of their presses, as well. Rethinking editorial acquisitions along these lines requires presses to focus hard on core areas of content, and to innovate within these areas to build lists that include not only monographs and trade titles, but advanced texts, reference books, and related multimedia publications. These would include, in the first wave, publications such as enhanced e-books and online critical editions. Penguin's *Classics Enriched eBooks [http://us.penguingroup.com/static/pages/whatsnext/eBooks.html]* series is a simple, but superb, example of how a single innovative idea can supercharge an entire publishing program.

In the reimagined university press, brainstorming editorial strategy is not only the province of editors, but of presses—so, open, honest, and steady consultation across departments is not only valuable, but critical. For example, the role of design and, therefore, of designers, is integral to the adaptation of book content for web presentation and therefore to a growth-driven editorial strategy.

Point 4. Edit, design, and produce books at the outset for all markets, print and digital, alike. Central to reimagining the university press is the effort to build XML tagging into our production workflow right at the outset so that we can produce our books in the full variety of forms—print and digital—that the evolving readership demands. Scholarly books are now more discoverable and searchable than ever and this property will only increase as semantic tagging grows in sophistication and makes possible more features within publications, including audio and digital elements. A major challenge for us in reimagining the university press is to make our books more readily deliverable in a variety of formats and with better and more sophisticated metadata. This effort begins—but does not end—with a full transition to XML workflow. Applications abound. For example, mobile-ready titles being developed by various presses (Phaidon's famed *Wallpaper City Guides* [http://www.phaidon.com/travel/] , for instance) represent an attractive end-expression of digital production capability. The corollary requirement is to develop effective digital asset distribution systems either within the press or through independent partners for managing online business.

Point 5. Add library search and discoverability as a pillar of our publishing. For the past decade and then some, online book merchants and search engines have made scholarly titles more discoverable than ever, even as our traditional library markets have withered. The emergence of new university press consortia for delivering e-books collectively to research libraries—notably those now being discussed between several press groups and supporting organizations—should provide us with the means of distributing our titles to research libraries in large, cross-press collections—collections that are searchable across a variety of scholarly media. These prospective consortia will help better integrate our research monographs and other titles into the scholarly workflow, and make our respective brands—our lists, series, and specific titles—visible and relevant to scholars in new and exciting ways.

Point 6. Keep counsel with our colleagues in commercial publishing. For all the talk in the AAUP of university presses being part of the "scholarly communications ecosystem," which we most certainly are, we are also part of a dynamic global business: book publishing. Changes in the industrial and technological environment that are affecting university presses are also affecting our commercial colleagues. These fellow publishers are adapting in very creative ways that we can and should keep abreast of. For example, the proliferation of new digital textbooks from college publishers available through the higher-education publishing portal, *CourseSmart [http://www.coursesmart.com/]* , is impressive. Further, it is vital that we remind ourselves that they, commercial publishers, are also part of the same scholarly communications ecosystem that we proudly claim our place in, and have been so for centuries in some cases. Seeking the perspective on critical matters (for example, by engaging their representatives where appropriate on our various advisory boards and inviting them to our conferences) can only help us do a better job as scholarly publishers.

Point 7. Integrate our curricular agendas with those of our host universities. At the risk of being labeled a radical specialist, I embrace the idea that presses should strategically (though not slavishly) pattern their publishing abreast of the emerging strengths of their host universities. For example, a press that represents a university marked by a powerful engineering school has a great opportunity to bring excellent scholarship to market in engineering, computer science, applied math, and related subjects (hats off to The MIT Press). Obviously, this is not so easy in the case of presses affiliated with massive "megaversities" that seemingly specialize in everything. Nevertheless, presses might consult with their host universities to identify those areas marked for growth and investment over the next generation, and consider adapting their lists to this profile. To put it differently, it does us little good for dozens of presses to be mutilating each other in competition for scarce monographs in anthropology or literature, only to forego exciting publishing opportunities in, say, graphic design or neuroscience.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not recommending that presses withdraw from the humanities. But I am advocating that we incorporate into our traditional humanities lists exciting and emerging fields, both as a means of supporting our humanities publishing through new sources of income, and also as a way of exploiting and reinforcing the scholarly identity we share with our host universities. Beyond conversations on our specific campuses, the issue of new curricular coverage should be one of ongoing discussion within a reimagined university press community so that we are applying our collective imagination to the challenge of publishing for the emerging universe of scholarly knowledge.

Point 8. Revisit and refine our governance practices with our host institutions. Much as university presses are all alike, so, too, we're all different. Among the many factors that make us different are the structures by which we are governed. Some presses report to a provost, others a dean, others a university librarian, others an independent board, others some combination of the above. Given the challenges posed by technological change and financial pressure, it is vitally important that regardless of the governing structure under which each press operates, good governance goals are being served and good governance practices articulated and promoted. Especially now, at a time of great uncertainty and change, *communication is everything*, and if there is one thing good governance promotes, it is communication. To the extent that the governance practices of our presses promote clear and constructive communication between presses and our host institutions, we will increase the credibility and the support we need to navigate the changes confronting us in the months and years to come. Along these lines, a much larger conversation needs to take place within a reimagined university press community about what constitutes best press governance practices, and how to implement, spread, and sustain them. The results of this conversation should inform our discussion with our trustees and with administrators at our host universities about long-term strategies for supporting and strengthening our publishing.

Point 9. Keep abreast of contract and copyright issues. The changes in contracts, copyright, and permissions practices are so profound and sweeping during this, the digital transition, that it is imperative that even the smallest presses keep current with evolving developments in this part of the publishing universe. Not only can knowledgeable colleagues help guide the press through the rocky shoals of legal change, thereby keeping the press's contracts up to date and strong, but they can serve an educative function within the press by informing editors and marketers of relevant changes in the new publishing landscape. Other sources of valuable information and assistance in this regard are the copyright committees of the AAUP and the Association of American Publishers.

Point 10. Create within the press a culture of consultation. Given the technological changes affecting university presses and likely to influence us for years to come, it is vital to improve and enhance the lines of communications throughout our presses. Since change will strike presses in different and unpredictable stress points—design, fulfillment, copyright, etc.— it is essential that departments do not insulate themselves from one another, but that they talk to each other. Greater consultation might best be achieved through the simple establishment of regular cross-departmental meetings.

Just as an example, at my press, we have recently institutionalized two such meetings: one to discuss projects, the other to discuss policy. In the former, we meet weekly to discuss editorial projects and ideas at the earliest possible stages, soliciting the comments and suggestions of the entire editorial staff, plus marketers, publicists, production, and sales colleagues. Editors leave this meeting with a much stronger sense of the prospects for their projects than if they considered them in isolation. Similarly, once a month, we assemble the managers of the press as well as other colleagues to discuss policies with regard to dealing with new developments in the publishing environment: production workflow, permissions, design, social networking, and other phenomena that require us to adapt our policies and practices to the strategic setting in which we operate.

These meetings—and the culture of consultation they embody—help us work out the best possible decisions while also institutionalizing these decisions throughout the organization. By the same token, within a reimagined university press community, regular consultation (for example, various online discussions of e-book publishing practices now fully underway) serves to enlarge the openness and transparency needed to deal with the technological and cultural issues that define the new environment.

To conclude, when Phil Pochoda invited me to write for this issue, he suggested that one of the questions I might speculate about is what the university press might look like 10 to 20 years from now. As a publisher who spends probably too much time and nervous energy speculating about what might happen 10 to 20 days from now, I thought this a fanciful proposition. But now that I've gone on record to compare the annual AAUP meetings to the Council of Trent, maybe a 20-year projection isn't as far-fetched as I'd thought. Of this, I would say the following.

Regardless of what the publishing landscape looks like in 10 to 20 years—as noted above, personally I believe that books will be a force a generation from now, though available in an untold variety of formats—the one thing I am sure of is that university presses, if we are to thrive, must be open and consultative organizations, both internally and externally. Our working capital is located in our people—especially in their intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm, and in the structures of communication that unite our people, both within presses and in the larger scholarly and publishing organizations in which we work.

Our capacity to remain open to change, and to adapt the internal workings and structures of our organizations to exploit change, will determine our fortunes over the next decades. If we believe in books as pillars of the scholarly conversation, regardless of the form in which they appear, they need to be chosen shrewdly, and structured, edited, designed, produced, and framed well for their core audiences. They have to be titled properly, described compellingly, and introduced imaginatively to the writers, editors, and producers who create the conversations that focus readers on the distinctive and special contributions contained therein. These same books have to be pitched to foreign language publishers around the world for translation consideration. This is what we do.

Technology will surely change the ways in which we perform these tasks just as it has over the past generation, but the crucial variable in this exercise is how we leverage the changes in our organizations to adapt.

As a noted economist once observed, growth occurs not from new ingredients, but from better recipes. It is in recipes—the small and subtle changes in how we organize our work—that will matter in the future. This organization of work will require, more than anything else, openness, consultation, and communication—an outlook that will capture the curiosity and enthusiasm of our people.

Just as internal communication will be a vital ingredient moving forward, so, too, will communications beyond our doors. We need to use our consultative talents in conversation with our administrators, trustees, authors, suppliers, customers, librarians, technologists, foundations, booksellers, and commercial publishing colleagues, as well as with each other. It is vital that we keep the fresh air flowing freely inside the corridors of our presses. Regardless of the changes to come, if we remain open, communicative, and adaptable, the likelihood of our serving our scholarly goals over the next generation and beyond will be all the greater. Reimagining the university press starts with an attitude, driven by a respect for content combined with organizational adaptability, and a commitment to communicate.

Peter J. Dougherty is Director of Princeton University Press. His book, *Who's Afraid of Adam Smith?,* was published by John Wiley & Sons in 2002.