



What Might Be in Store for Universities' Presses

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Abstract

Universities that own presses are motivated to advance the quality of scholarship and other academic work by their own faculties. Information technologies that make copying and distribution very inexpensive have changed the economics of scholarly publishing such that in most cases it is difficult for a university press to survive without subsidy. In this context, the interests of the home university and that of the press are likely to diverge. This paper considers some possible consequences of this tension, and suggests a variety of ways in which university-based publications might evolve.

Asked to write about reimagining university presses, I find that I never imagined them in the first place. So, what are they? What do they do (and what have they done)? How does the digital revolution change them? What, in light of new and emerging technologies and purposes of academe, do we want them to do?

University presses are different from other presses because they are owned by universities, institutions of higher education. In order to avoid what I think are unimportant distinctions, I also include presses that are owned by research institutions, the National Academies, and other entities whose mission is the production of scholarship, teaching, and learning. What distinguishes this group of publishers from other publishers is that the institutions to which they are responsible are charged with advancing academic missions. Other publishers, variously, are ultimately responsible to stockholders, the advancement of particular religions or political philosophies, or some other set of causes, but not to scholarship per se. Note that commercial publishers that specialize in academic publications (e.g., Routledge, SAGE, Elsevier) are not included in this definition. The way in which these enterprises conduct their business is highly consequential for university presses and academe more broadly. But the key distinction is that commercial entities serve stockholders, while university presses (and their kin) serve (or ought to serve) nonprofit institutions of scholarship and higher learning. ^[2] [#N2]

If university presses are charged with serving the missions of the nonprofit academic institutions that own them, our reimagining of presses going forward should be directly responsive to those missions. Consequently, the motivation for engaging in reimagination, namely changes in the technologies and marketplaces of academic publishing, should be evaluated principally as they affect the home institution's performance of its academic missions: How, in this new and rapidly changing world, can scholarship and related activities best be advanced by university-owned publishing entities? (The discerning reader will notice that I have just changed the object of study from university presses to an undefined, broader class of publishing entities. This was deliberate. Stay tuned.)

Broadly, university-based scholarly publication can advance the home university's cause through a combination of the following three types of mechanism:

- Improving, via publication, the quality and quantity—the effect on academic discourse—of locally produced scholarship
- Enhancing the reputation and scholarly contributions of the institution through mechanisms other than publication of locally produced scholarship
- Running at a profit, thereby making resources available for academic purposes

The logic of benefit-cost analysis tells us that the combination is important. All three mechanisms can count positively or negatively in the university's evaluation of contributions made by its publishing activities. The “bottom line” is not solely instrumental, reputational, or financial. It is a weighted algebraic sum of all three. For example, a press that added to the ability of the local faculty to publish well, and that published important scholarship from any source that enhanced the general reputation of the university might be worth a considerable subsidy. If its performance on the first two criteria

weakened, the case for subsidy would also be weakened. As in almost everything that universities do, the purpose of university-based publication is not to make money, but net revenue is relevant to a university's evaluation of the activity, because subsidy and profit can be used in service of a university's missions. [3] [#N3]

Publication of Locally Produced Scholarship

The fundamental purpose of university presses adduced in most of their mission statements and in the hearts and minds of scholars and academic administrators is to advance scholarly work through publication. Publication is of course an essential part of scholarship—scholarly work that is not made public has little, if any, value for the advancement of knowledge and understanding that is at the heart of the academic mission. As I have said elsewhere, “publish or perish” is a moral imperative; if a scholar has something to say and does not publish, he or she deserves to perish, at least in the context of the research academy. [4] [#N4]

Having the expertise to produce academic publications locally makes it easier for the local faculty to avail themselves of that expertise, and hence to publish effectively. Over time, this advantage has eroded, at least with respect to formal publication. Most reputable presses make it a point of pride that faculty from the home institution are subject to the same quality standards for publication as are faculty from other institutions. And most press boards, tenure committees, department chairs, and others who are part of the system of refereed scholarly publishing defend vigorously against possible charges that their publications are in any way a “vanity press” for the local faculty. [5] [#N5] To the extent that it is relatively easy to work with local editors, there is indeed still some local advantage conferred by having a press, but it remains the case that the vast majority of university press publications are of works written elsewhere, and that a press would be undertaking a grave reputational risk were this not so.

The bottom line here is simple: It is very much in the interest of a university to take actions designed to assure the presence of a robust system of scholarly publishing in which their faculty can participate. Operating a press is one such action, but if the press requires subsidy—and almost all do—it raises a classic, public goods/free-rider problem. While all universities rely on a relatively small subset that engage in formal academic publication, the bulk of any faculty's publications will be undertaken by other universities' presses. The value of having a press of one's own in this context is almost certainly small unless the local press provides some advantage to the local faculty, either by publishing that faculty's work or by providing expertise that makes it easier for the faculty to publish elsewhere. The first mechanism risks running afoul of the vanity press problem, and although the second mechanism has the right sign, the magnitude is almost certainly not large enough to justify any substantial subsidy to a local press.

While it doesn't make much sense for a university to subsidize a press in support of its own faculty's publication, it makes a lot of sense for a university to subsidize its own faculty's publication in a variety of other ways. Indeed, the lion's share of the cost of publication—paying the faculty member and providing library, laboratory, and physical infrastructure, network access, and more—is already subsidized; academic research and writing, by and large, is not supported by sales of books and articles, which constitute only a tiny portion of the economic resources that go into the work.

I noted above that publication is an essential element of scholarly work. It is thus squarely on mission for universities to support the distribution of their own faculties' work. This can be done in a variety of ways, including subventions for formal publication elsewhere, establishing and promoting the use of institutional repositories, and other relatively (relative to formal press publication) low-cost means of producing and distributing work on the web, with or without complementary print on demand (POD) capability. The university could also support the development of consulting expertise, available to the faculty, on publishing mechanisms and venues that the faculty could use. Universities could also band together to economize on those aspects of publication where there are economies of scale (including almost everything other than the activities of acquisitions editors in screening, recruiting, and improving manuscripts). University presses, at least all but the largest ones, lament their inability to keep up with changes in technology and to provide robust and flexible publishing platforms that can deliver multiple media through multiple channels. Although I have no proof, it seems likely that these capabilities could be shared across many presses, leaving a smaller, cheaper, and arguably more important role (editing and field development) for the distinctively local elements at each press.

Finally, it is hardly news that the market for much excellent scholarly work is far too thin for sales of monographs to cover the costs of their production. Specialized work is often of direct interest only to others working in the field. Libraries that attend to the scholarly record buy such works, but unless they get assigned to courses with a fairly large number of students, specialized academic publications rarely pay their own way. Without such publications, however, the progress of scholarship is slowed, and individual scholars' contributions can go unrecognized and unused.

Publication of low-volume academic work requires subsidy, but I think that a good deal of cost can also be wrung out of the system, thereby making it more plausible that the home institutions, libraries, and other parts of academe will pay the requisite subsidy. One mechanism for cost reduction is the “platform-sharing” that I discussed above. Additionally, established presses, or new imprints, plausibly under the aegis of university libraries, could develop series of carefully reviewed, but lightly edited and simply produced, monographs. As suggested in the previous paragraph, these could be distributed on the web, plausibly for free, with modest charges for POD versions. The production and distribution of such work is as much within the mission of the academic library as that of the scholarly publisher, arguing for closer collaboration between these two sets of institutions. The library has the great advantage that providing access to scholarly work at no charge is squarely within its existing business model. [6] [#N6], [7] [#N7]

Academic Reputation of the Press

A university press is part of a university’s “brand,” and there are powerful market forces in the economy of academic reputation that tend to align the quality of a press with that of its home institution. It is inconceivable, I assert, that Yale or Oxford would tolerate a low-quality eponymous university press, and it is unlikely that a great press could be sustained at a lesser institution, although several smaller presses have distinguished lists in particular fields. A press may also confer a “warm glow” to the local university in recognition of the service provided to the system of scholarly publication, and it may also lead to approval from other institutions that benefit from its existence. A press makes many contributions to the reputation of its university, but it remains perfectly possible for a very good institution to have no press at all. [8] [#N8] Unlike math and literature departments, locally owned and operated publication entities have never been essential elements of excellent universities. [9] [#N9]

Presses contribute positively to the reputation of their home institutions by producing high-quality lists in specific fields. Some of the larger presses cover many fields, others a smaller handful of specialties, but in all cases, the level of quality is determined in a market in which an editor seeks to establish that his or her press or his or her series is a good place to publish in a given field and an author seeks to publish where he or she will get the most reputational benefit, the most editorial and marketing support, and the largest readership for his or her work. In most cases, authors (at least rational authors) are not strongly motivated by the prospect of making money directly from press publications. While a handful of books do much better, a first-tier author in most fields published by university presses would do very well to sell 3,000 copies of a book over its lifetime, yielding royalties for the author of perhaps \$12,000. For a more typical but still successful monograph that sells 1,000 copies, the royalties to the author will be less than \$4,000, and for many monographs, lifetime royalties are zero or close to it. Thus, the unusually productive and popular scholar who produces a monograph every five years might obtain a supplement to annual income ranging from next to nothing to a few percent. The typical case will be closer to nothing. Only a tiny fraction of university press monographs do better than this. The big financial payoff to the author of the great majority of scholarly books is not the royalties but the visibility (and hence the salary and working conditions) of the author in the academic labor market.

The benefit to a university’s reputation that derives from its press having a strong list in a given specialty is enhanced if the faculty of the university in that area also has a good reputation. MIT press, for example, is very strong in the general area of technical change and associated business and economic phenomena. Moreover, academe is somewhat unusual in that there is brand recognition across publishers—academics tend to have fairly well-developed views of the best places to publish in a given specialty. So, again there is a payoff to a given university in having a press that is strong in a set of well-identified fields. The difficult question is whether this reputational value is worth its cost. [10] [#N10] The decision facing a given university that has a press with a set of editors, skills, and reputations, is whether to get better, worse, or stay about the same in the areas where it now publishes, and whether to develop publishing expertise in new areas. The social value of the skills that are embodied in university presses derive largely from the ability of editors to sustain and enhance scholarly work in emerging and developing fields, and to support the growth and development of established fields. This is also the source of the distinctive reputational value of any press, particularly now that digital copying and distribution have become increasingly inexpensive and many of the production and distribution functions of the presses are commoditized and outsourced.

Profit and Loss

For everything that a university does, the sources and uses of economic resources are relevant; for example, a university hospital that turns a profit (or, all else equal, reduces its losses) adds to the capacity of its home institution to produce scholarship, including teaching and recruiting and retaining a strong and diverse student body. For given quality, a less expensive introductory economics course serves the university better than a more expensive one. The same is true for a university press. A crucial difference between a hospital and a press, of course, is that a university cannot engage in

medical education without a business relationship with a nearby hospital (although the hospital need not be owned by the university) whereas a university's faculty and research staff can engage in the full range of scholarly activity and publication without there being any formal relationship between scholarly publishing venues and one's university.

That presses arose and prospered in universities suggests that universities are often loci of special expertise that is relevant to scholarly publishing. This makes all the sense in the world—writers and readers of scholarly work are highly concentrated in universities and research institutions. Where better to establish effective methods and mechanisms of scholarly publishing? ^[11] ^[#N11] Moreover, university presses are attractive to readers who value their imprimatur. This is not simply a tautology. There are those of us who like our footnotes on the page, and who are more likely to trust a treatise on behavioral economics published by Princeton than a book on a similar topic published by a commercial publisher.

I have nothing profound to say about the future of the commercial publishing industry, including the commercially successful activities of university presses. It's possible the industry will be unable to survive in a world where copying and distribution are available almost everywhere at zero marginal cost. But for much of the work that they publish, the big university publishers will have available to them the same business models that are available to the commercial trade publishers. Provided that the great university presses are not profligate with the advantages that come with their current brands and their other assets, they should do almost as well as their commercial brethren. Whether this assessment is optimistic or pessimistic depends on one's assessment of what will happen to commercial publishing, a question that is substantially beyond the scope of this essay. In any case, smaller presses, unable to exploit scale economies, are likely to require larger subsidies in order to survive in the digital world in the current form.

Some Futures for Scholarly Publishing in the Digital World

I have not answered directly the most difficult and important question raised in these musings: Taken as given that scholarship will still require the production and distribution of complicated and erudite scholarly works that will have approximately current size and scope of monographs (although more and more often, multimedia) in quantity and quality, how will such works be produced, distributed, and preserved?

It seems extremely unlikely to me that specialized works of this kind will survive in the marketplace if they are required to cover their costs by being sold. More likely, they will be subsidized in some cases and self-published in others, with the subsidies attaching to faculty at research universities, to be deployed in whatever marketplaces (including university-based publishing) that emerge. The subsidized instances, of course, will be better edited and better produced than the self-published works, but with some luck and some help from foundations and from entrepreneurs, there will be a rich set of works of sufficient quality so that there is a chance that an audience will find them. From my perspective, this is a pretty good outcome. I do not think it desirable that the benefits of academic work be hidden behind pay walls that are high enough to make it difficult for potential readers to find and use the work easily and effectively. ^[12] ^[#N12]

In this environment, the established presses and the works they publish (with a combination of subsidy and whatever profits accrue to academic books that can compete in the trade market) will have a significant advantage, as they will come to the marketplace of ideas with prepublication vetting that is of value to readers who always have more to read than they can hope to get to. Yet, this is not so different from our current world, in which the reputation of presses and reviewers has a substantial impact on what we choose to read (or to skim).

The problem for individual universities will become easier as an increasing number of small and unprofitable presses close and as more scholarly discourse takes place in publishing venues other than traditional presses and journals. In various combinations, in the interest of helping their faculties to publish, universities will subvene and provide other support to help to sustain the ability of their faculties to make their scholarship public. They will also be responsive to alliances between faculty and editors to develop reputations for producing and editing works in fields that are of interest to the faculty and that enhance the reputation of the institution. This latter behavior would be strengthened if groups of presses united to deliver the business functions of academic publication, thereby exploiting relevant scale economies, much as academic libraries are developing, via the HathiTrust and other mechanisms, the ability to share many traditional library functions, notably preserving and providing access to collections. ^[13] ^[#N13]

I expect university-based scholarly publishing to change form in either or both of the two ways that I have discussed in this paper: (1) They could exploit scale economies in production and business functions, differentiating themselves by their unique skills in editing and sharing, complementary with the academic strength of their home universities. (2) They

could help to create new types of scholarly publication that take advantage of digital technologies in ways that make them less expensive to produce. Both tactics are all the more attractive as scholars, notably in the humanities, start to produce works that directly exploit the functionality of new information technologies. ^[14] ^[#N14]

Meanwhile, the largest and most successful presses will be able to play their current strategy, acting as high-end trade publishers with specialties in scholarly work. I expect that these publishers will survive as well (or as badly) as the trade publishers that they resemble. In sum, the three paths sketched in this paragraph seem to me to constitute a fairly rich system of publication of scholarly monographs.

Focusing on faculty publication and on editorial strength is likely to make support of scholarly publishing more attractive to a university's academic leadership. A million dollars a year to sustain a press may seem like a lot of money to a big research university. A million dollars a year to support the publication of faculty work in the humanities is a drop in the bucket relative to the total expenditure on humanities faculty in that same university.

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Courant has authored half a dozen books, and over seventy papers, covering a broad range of topics in economics and public policy, including tax policy, state and local economic development, gender differences in pay, housing, radon and public health, relationships between economic growth and environmental policy, and university budgeting systems. More recently, his academic work has considered the economics of universities, the economics of libraries and archives, and the effects of new information technologies and other disruptions on scholarship, scholarly publication, and academic libraries.

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Notes

1. University Librarian and Dean of Libraries, Harold T. Shapiro Collegiate Professor of Public Policy, and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor, Department of Economics and School of Information, the University of Michigan. I am grateful to Phil Pochoda, Molly Kleinman, and Maria Bonn for helpful comments and discussions. [⚡] ^[#N1-pt1]
2. As far as I know, none of the for-profit institutions of higher education have established presses that produce academic publications, although one could call into question the nonprofit status of the Harvard Business School and its associated Review. Should such an entity materialize, by my definition, it would not qualify as a university press, because it would be ultimately beholden to stockholders rather than a set of academic missions. [⚡] ^[#N2-pt1]
3. One of my favorite facts about the University of Michigan is that it has a fully-functional gamelan, an Indonesian ensemble of percussion instruments that must be played together, and that produce a remarkable kind of music when they do. The gamelan is anything but a profit center, but the University's support of its maintenance and use is easily justified by the strength of its programs in ethnomusicology and South Asian Studies. [⚡] ^[#N3-pt1]
4. Paul N. Courant, "Scholarship and Academic Libraries (and their kin) in the World of Google," *First Monday* 11, no. 8 (August 2006), http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_8/courant/index.html [http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_8/courant/index.html]. [⚡] ^[#N4-pt1]
5. Governing boards often take a different view, arguing that the university should not subsidize the local press unless it confers direct and material benefit on its own faculty. [⚡] ^[#N5-pt1]

6. Some would argue that web distribution of the kind that I am proposing here would not “count” in peer review of tenure cases. I would argue in response that to the extent this poses a problem, the problem is a correctable failure of academic peer review as sometimes practiced rather than an intrinsic feature of peer review. (See, for example, <http://paulcourant.net/2008/10/12/on-the-meaning-and-importance-of-peer-review/> [<http://paulcourant.net/2008/10/12/on-the-meaning-and-importance-of-peer-review/>].) The notion that the entire apparatus of scholarly publishing “needs” to be maintained in order to assure that works come with some branding before they can be read by the scholarly community at large seems to me to be exactly backwards. Rather, judgments about the quality of scholarly work should be made by the broad community of scholars in the field once the work is already out there. To be sure, good editing and marketing provide real enhancements to a book, but their absence should not prevent the book from seeing the light of day, perhaps to be improved in a later edition if it proves to be of sufficient interest. I note that when I first started to serve on tenure committees, we required that books be reviewed in appropriate scholarly venues (generally journals) after publication before they could count for tenure. That (with a careful reading of the book and the reviews) is a much better system than giving tenure for a manuscript and a contract to publish it. ♣ [#N6-pt1]
7. Another objection to “lightly edited” monographs is that they will not attract the best authors, who prefer to publish highly produced, more costly volumes. This is a cost that I can live with, as long as works that are worth reading (and worth having been written) make their way into published scholarship. Moreover, some authors are more interested in the ease with which their work can be found and used than the aesthetics of the venue in which it appears. The university’s interest should surely be aimed at contributing to scholarship by the most effective available means. ♣ [#N7-pt1]
8. Consider Emory University, Brown University, and the University of Oregon. ♣ [#N8-pt1]
9. This is certainly true for the past hundred years or so. Has it always been? One could do a study that I have not done: Look at the best universities, say every 50 years for the past 300, and see when the divergence occurred, or whether it has always been that way. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Oxford, and Cambridge have had presses at least for a long time, and they have also been among the best English-speaking universities in the world for a long time, but one could look at the data much more carefully. ♣ [#N9-pt1]
10. I’m not arguing about whether reputation is an appropriate dimension of competition among universities. Success or failure in advancing scholarship and learning are largely measured through reputation that is based on peer judgments of other scholars in the field, and that system has generally worked well. ♣ [#N10-pt1]
11. Universities often engage in activities that are related to (or at least not inimical to) their core academic missions and that have some complementarity in production with respect to those missions. See Paul N. Courant, Michael McPherson, and Alexandra M. Resch, “The Public Role in Higher Education,” *National Tax Journal* 59, 2 (June 2006): 291–318, for an elaboration to this point as applied to hospitals and cultural production. ♣ [#N11-pt1]
12. This last remark, although applicable to the monographic literature that has been the focus of this essay, is much more on target for journal literature, especially as published by commercial publishers and some scientific societies. Here, subsidized university-based publications have the potential to provide both financial and scholarly benefits to academe. I would very much hope that the skills that many universities have developed in academic publishing will come to be applied to creating an environment in which all scholarly work is broadly accessible at reasonable cost, and all such work is produced in ways that assure the ability of the academy to provide reliable, long-term preservation of scholarly work. ♣ [#N12-pt1]
13. See “University Publishing in a Digital Age,” <http://www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/university-publishing-in-a-digital-age> [<http://www.ithaka.org/ithaka-s-r/research/university-publishing-in-a-digital-age>] ♣ [#N13-pt1]
14. For a lively and current set of discussions of these issues, see Jerome McGann, ed., *Online Humanities Scholarship: The Shape of Things to Come*, available at http://cnx.org/content/col11199/1.1/content_info [http://cnx.org/content/col11199/1.1/content_info] ♣ [#N14-pt1]