Guest Post: The University Press Vault: Leveraging Backlist Content

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In the fall of 2019, Disney launched its new streaming service, Disney+. Disney opened its famed Vault to lovers of classic Disney, fans of newer Disney-affiliated producers, and stans for Baby Yoda. All at once, several decades’ worth of content became available—for a price. And, all at once, Disney earned massive revenue for content that it already owned. The company leveraged its backlist, demonstrating how valuable a producer’s content can be. And as the global pandemic interrupts business as usual for media producers all over the world, we are seeing companies creatively recycle the old content they own in new ways.

But what do the megacorporation Disney and popular media have to do with a post about university presses? Well, just like Disney and other media producers, university presses have vaults. Some presses have a century’s worth of publications; others have been publishing for decades. Many university press vaults include both books and journals, meaning an incredibly broad array of content on diverse topics. As open access becomes the soup du jour, many presses aren’t in a position to make content freely available on a large scale. Presses—just like individuals—need to have blended investment portfolios to support content they are producing and the innovations they are experimenting with. And with a little imagination, presses can find many ways to invest time and resources in strategies to leverage their backlist content to generate the financial and cultural capital they need to stay in business.

Historically, there are many ways that university presses have been refreshing backlist publications for frontlist attention. The example that may come to most minds is a new edition—whether a second edition, a fifth edition, an anniversary edition, or if a press is really lucky, a movie version edition. Another traditional example is the acquired reprint, when a press sees value in a book on another press’s backlist (sometimes one that has gone out of print), and licenses the right to publish it on its own frontlist. Then there are backlist gems that are just perennial sellers (maybe a reference book, maybe a military history book that never seems to feel outdated) that a press mostly just needs to keep in print, maybe putting on a new cover or refreshing the interior occasionally. And, of course, a backlist is a valuable source of revenue from licensing content for course packs, documentary readers, anthologies, and other purposes.

But in an increasingly competitive publishing landscape, are there ways we can tap the potential of our backlists even more? What strategies can help monetize content that a press has already invested in but perhaps has become dormant? Or, are there ways we can leverage backlist content to show certain commitments that—beyond financial capital—boost cultural and brand capital? I’ve been able to explore answers to these questions with a couple of experiments at University of Illinois Press (UIP). One was the press’s first Spanish-language edition of a book originally published in English, Illegal: Reflections of an Undocumented Immigrant. First published in 2014 in a series whose editors had wanted to have Spanish translations of series books for years, the English edition had done well enough to support exploring a translation. So the Spanish edition met the commitments of the series
editors and conveyed a broader message about the press’s willingness to invest in projects that align with our non-profit mission to disseminate work to the broadest possible audience. The Spanish edition, *Illegal: Reflexiones de un inmigrante indocumentado*, became available in May 2019. Now that UIP has already invested in the production of both English and Spanish language content, I am interested in working on a side-by-side bilingual edition.

The Spanish edition of *Illegal* is an example of a project made possible by sustained interest in a backlist book. However, I was also interested in drawing on the University of Illinois Press’s vault to respond to the cultural zeitgeist. The centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment gave me my opportunity. I put together an anthology of chapters from previously published University of Illinois Press books that dealt with women’s suffrage or the vote in some way. As with most experiments, there were certain limitations. In this case, the collection could only represent topics that UIP has explicitly published. But, the possibilities outweighed the limitations by far, and thanks to the press’s vault, in this case its long commitment to publishing books about the struggles for voting rights, the volume went beyond a 1920s-centric project to include other topics, like voting and the civil rights movement and analyses of the voting gender gap. With an original introduction by women’s historian Nancy Hewitt, *100 Years of Women’s Suffrage: A University of Illinois Press Anthology* was published in the fall of 2019.

While these examples highlight my own projects, there are also really exciting broader initiatives happening across the university press world:

- The University of Illinois Press Journals department has a series called Common Threads that selects backlist journal articles to create a new product that is essentially a hybrid of a special journal issue and an anthology.

- In early 2020, MIT Press announced the MIT Press Reader. Described by press director Amy Brand as an “ambitious new online platform,” the Reader “draws on the Press’s rich backlist and family of distinguished authors to provide thought-provoking excerpts, interviews, and other original works written for the general public but backed by academic rigor.” Users gain access to the latest or featured articles, or they can navigate to particular topics that align with MIT Press’s publishing strengths: Science & Technology, Culture, Media, Environment, and Business and Economics. This new, freely accessible content then also helps to promote backlist publications.

- There have also been multi-press backlist collaborations. In the midst of continued mass shootings in 2019, Project MUSE coordinated with Johns Hopkins University Press (its administrator) and other university presses to make over a dozen books and journal articles on gun violence and its prevention in the United States openly accessible to anyone. That collection, “MUSE in Focus: Addressing Gun Violence,” was a timely way for the university press community to open its vault to a nation in urgent need of tools to process the continued tragedies involving firearms.
Although the false narrative of a bleak future for university presses continues to make its rounds, I think this could be an exciting time for university presses. Contrary to the tired rumors, print doesn’t show any signs of dying and the publishing industry also has an arsenal of new technologies at its disposal. As university presses better embrace their entwined identities as both non-profits and businesses serving both academic and non-academic communities, there are projects and initiatives we can dream of and then do that increase capital while fulfilling our missions. The discussion of backlist innovations here is in no way comprehensive. Rather, I hope it serves as an impetus for greater conversation and brainstorming about how presses—individually and collectively—can share the magic of their backlist in new and innovative ways.

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