Library Publishing

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On June 11, 2020, Inside Higher Ed ran a short piece reporting that the Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries just launched VCU Publishing, an initiative to publish scholarship by the university’s faculty and students in digital form. This new press responds to the enormous impact of the digital revolution on scholarly publishing, from the high prices for science journals and the declining sales of arts, humanities, and social sciences monographs to the opportunities for creating new genres of born-digital, multimedia scholarly work.

In its mission and focus, VCU Publishing is an increasingly common response to the current problems and possibilities in academic publishing. In 2008, the first survey of library publishers found 35; the 2020 Library Publishing Coalition’s directory lists 153. The coalition itself was founded in 2013 and now hosts an annual conference. This latest engagement of university and college libraries in scholarly publishing began around 2000, when librarians began taking advantage of early digital publishing tools like Dspace, bepress, DpubS, and Open Journal Systems to support born-digital work by their faculty and students and to create institutional repositories for preserving electronic data and publications. They also started digitizing library holdings and, in some cases, sold reprints of out-of-print public domain works.

As with everything digital, these early initiatives have grown and diversified. The rising cost of purchasing scholarly journals and other resources published by commercial presses, and the constraints on their uses, have spurred library interest in publishing. The emergence of library publishing is also closely related to the open access movement and other efforts to return control of scholarly output to scholarly communities. As of 2020, some libraries support full-fledged publishing imprints, such as the Amherst College Press and the Lever Press, both of which publish digital, open access works and are supported by and serve primarily liberal arts colleges. However, according to the LPC’s 2020 directory, the most common publishing services offered are copyright advice, metadata services (providing data so that works are discoverable in library catalogs), and persistent identifier assignment. Some libraries have partnered with other units of their universities to provide a range of publishing services, from access to the journal publishing platform OJS and its sister platform, Open Monograph Press, to editorial and project management. The most common types of content published are faculty and student journals and electronic theses and dissertations. Only 5 percent of library publishers report deriving any of their funding from sales revenue; most are a line on the library’s budget.

As faculty research increasingly draws on digital resources and produces born-digital, multimedia works, libraries play a key role by supplying the software platforms and offering project management, technical support, design services, and long-term hosting and preservation. Libraries are also engaged in helping faculty manage and archive the data produced by their research. A small but growing number are supporting their faculty in creating open educational resources—free textbooks intended to relieve students of the often steep cost of commercially produced equivalents.
The rise of library publishing begs the question, what about university presses? They were established mostly during the twentieth century, often initially within libraries, to provide an outlet for faculty research. The early university presses, like today’s library publishers, published largely their own institutions’ faculty, provided printing services to other departments, received a budget from the parent institution, and were not expected to generate much, if any, revenue. Over time, however, university presses have come to serve all researchers, not just their own institutions' faculty, and to publish selectively, guided by peer review and their areas of specialization. By the late twentieth century, universities came to expect their presses to generate a significant proportion if not all of the funds needed to cover production costs by selling books and journal subscriptions.

When the digital revolution began in the 1980s and 1990s, university presses rapidly incorporated the new technologies into their production workflows. In the early 2000s, they began producing ebooks and digitizing their backlists. Some, like the MIT Press, started experimenting with new forms and business models; Stanford University Press was the first to launch a regular program of multimedia digital publications; and there are many other examples of digital innovation. Yet, constrained by the need to generate their own operating funds, many presses are limited in their capacity to respond to the new possibilities. Libraries, meanwhile, tasked with serving their campuses’ research and teaching needs and facing escalating prices for new digital products from commercial STEM publishers, have strong incentives and the means to get creative.

The convergence of press and library services partially accounts for the fact that a growing number of university presses now report to libraries, though those relationships range from the merely formal to the closely integrated. The possibilities for collaboration seem extensive—Project Muse sprang from a university press–library partnership—but as of 2020, most university presses and libraries remain separate units.

Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post or email the Elephant about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing.