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# Staying Alive: The challenges Facing University Presses in the Dawn of the Digital Age

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**Staying Alive:  
The Challenges Facing University Presses in the Dawn of the  
Digital Age**

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degree at Pace University

Staying Alive:  
The Challenges Facing University Presses in the Dawn of the Digital Age

Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are approximately 6,900 postsecondary institutions and programs in America. Imagine now the number of professors, associated professors, junior professors, etc. that are required to fill all of the instructing positions in these universities for the humanities and sciences. The number must be astronomical. Next, reflect on the fact that at many universities it is a requirement that a professor must produce publishable academic work in order to achieve tenure, a practice commonly referred to as “publish or perish”. Professors of science mainly publish their work in scientific journals. While academic works in the humanities are sometimes published as articles in books or journals, the majority of humanities professors attempt to publish their work as monographs, which are books written as studies on a single subject. Because these books are so specialized, it is hard to get monographs published by the commercial trade publishing houses. This means that the only outlet for these books to get published is the university press.

When you consider these numbers, the task facing university presses is daunting, especially taking into account that there are only around 125 university presses in the United States since John Hopkins University opened their press in 1878. These 125 presses –ranging in size from very small to very large—are responsible for producing collectively more than 10,000 books annually (AAUP At-A-Glance). While presses are doing what they can to publish as many of the qualified submissions that they get throughout a year, it is impossible to publish everything. Scholars trust the ability of university presses to evaluate the manuscripts they receive and to judge what would be the best contribution to the respective academic fields. That is the strength of university presses and is why they are so valuable to the academic community.

There are many university presses that have excellent reputations among the academic community for publishing quality works. For example, The Johns Hopkins University Press ([www.press.jhu.edu](http://www.press.jhu.edu)), which is America's oldest university press, publishes annually around 60 scholarly journals and 200 new books each year and is well-known for publishing in the subjects of history, science, literary studies, political science, and medicine (*About Us*, par. 4). The University of Michigan Press ([www.press.umich.edu](http://www.press.umich.edu)), due to recent news, has come to be known as one of the leading pioneers in digital publishing in the country for reasons that will be discussed later in this paper. Their lists include many titles in the subjects of the humanities and social science that focus on political, social, and cultural issues faced by a global, multicultural society and also regional issues in fiction and the arts, human history, natural history, and the environment (*Our Books*, par. 3). Columbia University Press ([cup.columbia.edu](http://cup.columbia.edu)) publishes around 160 new titles a year in many fields, including Asian studies and literature, biological sciences, business, economics, environmental sciences, New York City history, philosophy, neuroscience, religion, etc. (*About the Press*, par. 7).

In the Spring of 2009, I completed an editorial internship at Columbia University Press. I made the decision to work for a scholarly publisher mainly because I wanted to expand my knowledge in the publishing field that I knew least about. In my five months with the press, I learned greatly about both scholarly publishing and the relative state of publishing in general. As an editorial intern, I learned the distinction between a nonfiction trade book and a monograph, which is what university presses publish. I also learned about the ways in which contracts and economics were different for scholarly publishers. In general, due to small print runs for university press titles, it is hard for a scholarly publisher to cover the expense of operation. There are never big advances given to authors and sometimes there are no advances at all. Also,

universities presses are only able to produce such high-level academic works because of peer review, a process by which editors send manuscripts to other scholars in the field to be evaluated.

Through my experiences at Columbia University Press I have learned that, while university presses once had some security as to their continued operation, the end of traditional scholarly publishing is eminent. This is a result both of the economy and of new advances in technology. With the end in sight, many university officials are asking the question, “Are our university presses worth saving? Is it time to cut our losses?” The first university presses had the luxury of being able to rely on the funding of their parent universities. Recently, however, presses have had the increased burden of having to put generating revenue before publishing the content and volume of work that they once were able to enjoy. As a result, publishers and editors have had to make concessions and hard decisions about what they publish and evaluate more closely what books will be profitable. In many cases, what makes money may not be the same as what is quality scholarly work.

Scholarly monographs are some of the most expensive books to produce, mostly due to the amount of overhead required for each book and the small amount of revenue generated per book. Unfortunately, the economy has steadily gotten worse and books have only gotten more expensive to produce. Between the years of 1986 and 2000, the unit cost for monographs increased on average by 82% (Phillips, table 1). For reasons that will be explained later in this paper, funding to university presses from parent universities has decreased with sometimes devastating consequences. Many presses report that they are operating in the red and with no end in sight. Where does this leave the 125 university presses?

Universally, university presses are doing what they can to adapt and stay in production in the face of low revenues, low university support and financial funding, and high pressure to fold.

Their product—scholarly work that is highly refined and relevant—represents the best scholarship that is available in any market. For any press to go out of business means that academics would lose an outlet to make available their knowledge and unique view point to the worldwide academic community, outlets that are already limited in number. Presses are pushing themselves to innovate and to reevaluate their traditional editorial, production, and marketing practices to find solutions in the face of these daunting economic problems.

With the arrival of digital publishing, all publishers are beginning to see a way to make an easy profit and to decrease their overall production costs. E-readers, such as the Amazon Kindle or the Sony Reader, are beginning to hit their stride, particularly in the trade market. The technology for these e-readers has been developed to a point where manufacturers are finally able to lower their prices, attracting a generation of consumers who find value in being able to access their books electronically. It is because of this that the e-book is making a large impact on the field of scholarly publishing, especially as many characteristics specific to scholarly publishing lend themselves very well to being published in an e-book format.

While digital publishing may prove to be the boost that scholarly publishing needs, the transition may be too much for some presses financially. To set up and develop the infrastructure to publish their books digitally may take more time and money than some presses can afford. To succeed, what is needed now is experimentation. I believe that new business models need to be experimented with and old ones need to be thrown out. For example, I will later discuss the recent decision made by University of Michigan Press to phase out the entire printing aspect of its press and switch solely to publishing e-books. With this example, I will show that this move by the University of Michigan will happen more and more as university presses struggle to meet their publishing and business objectives in the face of decreased revenues and decreased funding.

To succeed as a whole, I believe that university presses will need to work together. Some presses have already come together to discuss and solve the problems afflicting scholarly publishing, such as the Association of American University Presses, also known as the AAUP ([www.aaupnet.org](http://www.aaupnet.org)). It is not enough to recognize that a move towards digital publishing needs to occur. There needs to be a concerted and collaborative effort amongst all university presses to help establish digital publishing. This would ensure that smaller university presses are not left out and that the scholarship they publish is not eliminated. To succeed, scholarly publishing needs to be reformed. University presses must let go of their preconceptions of how to publish monographs, what needs to be published, and why they are publishing what they are. Presses need to remember their original purposes and objectives. It is through this many-faceted solution that university presses will leave behind traditional scholarly publishing and step into a new and expansive era. Through the information that follows, the efforts and discussion of many university presses and academics will be documented and used to show that the end of traditional scholarly publishing is at a necessary end.

### The “Traditional” University Press

#### *The First University Presses and their Mission*

It is perhaps not surprising that the first printed scholarly work was about religion. This work, which was an assessment on the Apostles’ Creed, was produced by Oxford University Press in 1478; they were next followed in 1521 by Cambridge University (Hawes 26). In these early years, the universities flourished under the support of their university heads, sufficient financial support, and dedicated direction. Specifically, university heads helped to secure for the presses by royal charter the right to print prayer books; also, in terms of financial stability, the

presses had the right to publish and sell Bibles, which remain to this day the highest selling books of all time (29).

The example set by Oxford and Cambridge was integral to establishing the university press industry in the United States. When paired with the example set by German publishers, of which there were no university publishers but were by reputation comparably specialized to the university press in what they published, the examples served as a great influence to the founders of Johns Hopkins University, who were facing the prospect of not only establishing a press but also creating a university (Kerr 16). Johns Hopkins University, established in 1878, is credited as being the first continuously running university press in the United States. Daniel Colt Gilman, founder of Johns Hopkins University, acknowledged that, “it is one of the noblest duties of a university to advance knowledge, and to diffuse it not merely among those who can attend the daily lectures—but far and wide” (Givler 108). Around the same time, Columbia University was also busy establishing its own university press. Their objectives, in establishing a press, were “to promote the study of economic, historical, literary, philosophical, scientific, and other subjects; and to promote and encourage the publication of literary works embodying original research in such subjects” (Kerr 18). One of the most important precedents set by Columbia was the idea that the university press is responsible for promulgating knowledge on behalf of its parent university.

In 1917, the president of Columbia University made a major show of support for its press when he asserted to the trustees that, “A university has three functions to perform: It is to conserve knowledge; to advance knowledge, and to disseminate knowledge. It falls short of the full realization of its aim unless, having provided for the conservation of knowledge, it makes provision for its dissemination as well” (Kerr 24). It naturally followed that university presses



would be the conduit for fulfilling this role for its university. For this purpose, universities provided annual subsidies to their presses.

The words from Columbia's president and Johns Hopkins' founder help to show how intertwined the mission of the university was with its university press. If it was the responsibility of the university to promote scholarship, then the university press was their arm with which to spread its knowledge to the world.

As a whole, university presses were very true to this mission and assumed the responsibility of publishing on works on behalf of the university and its professors. However, there was a stigma on the works published. In their early histories, university presses began to known as "academic vanity presses" and were said to behave, "more as printers than publishers, they generally produced, without editing or evaluating, books dropped off by their local faculty, or Ph.D. theses written (and the publishing often paid for) by their graduate students" (Pochoda, par. 6). It wasn't until the late 1950's, with the introduction of peer manuscript review, and 1960's, when universities began pursuing books from outside the university, that scholarly publishing as we know it truly began.

Phil Pochoda, director of the University of Michigan Press and former president of the AAUP, attributes this transformation in the size and quality of university press lists to the increase in university attendance and also the dramatic increase of federal and state financial support to universities. While university presses did not receive funds directly from this support, the major party affected was university libraries, the best and most loyal customer of university presses. For many reasons, chief of which being financial, there was a consensus in the publishing world that it was in the best interests of all to let university presses handle the editing and publishing of scholarly work. Trade publishers agreed that it was impossible for them to

commit to the small editions and print sizes inherent in scholarly publishing and to wait for the revenues to come in on these investments (Kerr 35). University presses were better equipped to understand, evaluate, and produce scholarly works than trade publishers.

Another important part of the mission of university presses is their status as a nonprofit organization. What this meant is that they were not to be actively engaged in the pursuit of wealth. In obeying their own missions, presses fulfilled “the university’s mission of serving the public good through education, rather than of maximizing profits, increasing owners’ equity, and paying out shareholders’ dividends” (Givler 110). With the preoccupation of making profit eliminated, presses are free to focus on how and what scholarship needs to be published.

### *The Publishing Process*

While some university presses engage in the publishing of journals, the main format that presses produce are monographs. A monograph is “a book intended for specialists that has no significant course adoption potential at the undergrad level, and that about 200 libraries will buy” (Wasserman, par. 2). Monographs are generally written by all levels of professors and give a specialized account on a subject in their chosen field.

After the boom in scholarly publishing in the 1960’s, university presses became more engaged in pursuing quality scholarly works from both within and outside the university community. Many works started being submitted to the presses from well-known, published professors or professors trying to achieve tenure who are not well-known or are looking to publish for the first time that were not from their parent university. For the first time, scholars were searching to find a press that would provide the best fit for their work. At the same time, presses were able to, “select, evaluate, and develop work independently of the political pressures to which many scholars, and junior scholars in particular, are often subjected within their own

institutions” (Freeman 153). Some involved and highly informed editors are actively involved in soliciting manuscripts, primarily from authors that they have worked with before and are known in the field.

A unique practice that distinguishes university presses from trade publishers is their process of peer review. Once editors receive manuscripts that they are interested in pursuing, they send the manuscript to scholars and professors in the field for evaluation. This evaluation helps to place the proposed work in context with the other scholarship that has been done in the field. Peer manuscript review only became standard in American university presses in the late 1950’s, at the same time as the major boom in publishing (Pochoda, par. 6). Editors try to choose works that either add to or expand upon scholarship that has not been published before and is usually important or controversial to the field. Manuscripts that meet these criteria are easier to market and to sell. If a manuscript does not do this, it is usually not chosen.

Manuscripts that survive the first round of the review process are brought by editors to a university presses acquisitions meeting. The editors give their ideas of the manuscript, which include the ideal formats in which to sell it, the proposed market for the book, the final length of the book, unit cost, competition, etc., and also present their profit and loss statements for the book. The manuscripts are then evaluated by a panel of press employees—generally, the press director, financial officer, production, marketing and sales directors, and other editors, among others. If the acquisitions board decides to publish a book, the author is given a contract to sign which assures the press that the work is an original and that all permissions will be obtained by the author, the details of advances, royalties, and subventions—the financial contribution made by the author towards the production of the book to help offset the costs to publish, often in the form of grants or the authors own money.

Depending on the press, the next steps tend to vary. Generally, it involves additional rounds of peer review, which focus on the strength of the arguments posed by the author, the strength and relevance of the information presented, and the structure and presentation of the work as a whole. The manuscript will also go through copyediting. At the same time, the manuscript is going through marketing and sales to determine how to sell the book and where to sell it. Production is typesetting the book, designing and creating the first set of proofs; the art department is dealing with illustrations and cover art. Finally, the book is sent to the printer. This entire process can take two or three years to complete; in some works, such as series on a subject, it can take even longer.

With all of the work that must be done, the cost to produce a book often ends up being high, often higher than the amount of revenue that is brought in by the book. The factors that affect how much a book will end up costing include page count, trim size, illustrations, print run size for hardback and/or paperback printings, discounts to sellers, etc (Wasserman, table 1). Because the subjects of monographs are so specialized, this means that the market for these books are often small. Print runs below 1000 are the norm for most academic publishers.

To understand how much a book will either profit or lose a press, cost of sales, which includes the cost for plant or editorial costs, interior design, paper, printing and binding, and author royalty, must be deducted from the sales of the book. In addition, you must also factor in the cost of operating expenses, which is the biggest cost to a book. The biggest part of operating expenses is overhead, which is the cost of salaries, benefits, rent, repairs, marketing, etc. charged to each individual book (Wasserman, table 3). Overhead is generally several thousands of dollars. Often, overhead runs in excess of what revenue a book brings in which results in a book producing a loss in profit for a press.

While some authors receive subsidies from their schools or humanities foundations for their books—on average a press may receive up to \$400,000 or less a year through subsidies—considering the amount of books published a year by a press, presses may still operate at a loss. Another important fact to consider is the process of returns for scholarly books. While a vendor may order a certain amount of books and the press may count the money made on this sale as profit, it may take as much as a year before the vendor sends back the books and asks for a return, which the publisher is obliged to give them. These books must be warehoused until and if they are sold again.

It is hard work for a publisher to sell a scholarly work. Buyers know, however, that the books that are produced are credible, well-researched, well-reviewed, well-edited, and relevant works to their academic community. This is a quality that cannot be given a dollar amount and is why university presses are so important to scholarship. The original founders and university heads of Oxford, Cambridge, Johns Hopkins, and Columbia Universities saw this valuable quality of university presses and, accordingly, made the success and mission of their presses the mission of their university.

However, recently, there has been a revolution in the way that universities view their presses. It is so dramatic that many universities are asking the question of whether university presses should remain in business. In the next section, the reasons for this about face will be explained.

### The Problem with University Presses

#### *Divorce from the University and the University Library*

As described in the previous section, one factor that made university presses so unique in their early history was how intertwined their mission was with that of the university in

preserving and disseminating knowledge and scholarship. Another important link in the dissemination of knowledge is the university library. As mentioned earlier, the biggest customers to university presses are university libraries. The university library plays a large role as the repository of scholarly information. They are the most direct link to scholars and students and are able to determine what the needs of their community are.

In addition to buying monographs, libraries also buy journals, which give current research and scholarship on a subject or field periodically. Both journals and monographs can be invaluable to scholars and students in gaining extra knowledge on a subject for research purposes. In the 1960's, university libraries received a large infusion of funding from both the federal and state governments, which resulted in a period of increased library spending on journals and monographs (Pochoda, par. 6). One effect of this boom in publishing was that presses began looking outside their university for projects. Of their total lists, presses tend to devote less than 30 percent to publishing local authors (Brown 17). The focus was no longer on promoting the scholarship of their university but on the scholarship of scholars outside the university community. In an important yet subtle way, presses began to "become less integrated with the core activities and missions of their campuses" (4). They were still promoting scholarship, but just not that of their university.

A study conducted by Ithaka ([www.ithaka.org](http://www.ithaka.org)), an organization committed to reviewing the role of U.S. university presses in academic publishing, centers on the analysis of university publishing as it moves towards digital publishing. They conducted a number of surveys with university administrations. What they found was that there was a "significant detachment from administrators about publishing's connection to their core mission" (Brown 5). The blame for this disconnect does not lie solely with university presses. As the presses have expanded, the

university and its faculty have also made the conscious decision to publish away from their home university press. This is due to the fact that many scholars “seek to publish their books with the most prestigious press in their field, regardless of affiliation. They actually often prefer to publish their books at presses other than their own, because institutional distance avoids any suggestion of favoritism and provides external validation” (17). Publishing away from their home press makes an author’s work that much more legitimate to other scholars.

Although this separation appears to have once been mutually desired, it seems that the presses are suffering the most. As presses began to service the wider academic community, university administrations began to give less support to them. Why support an institution that does not reciprocate? There is no longer communication between what the university needs and what the university press can provide to satisfy the need. While some universities continue to give support to presses and are happy with their good reputations and body of work, many are decreasing the amounts of subsidies to their presses. For example, Middlesex University Press will be closing at the end of the year as the situation at the press reached a point where the only source of income for the press was the subsidy from Middlesex University (Neilan, par. 2). It became a situation where there was no longer any valuable to keep this press in business.

In addition to the decrease in university subsidies and support, librarians have begun to take issue with university presses. As librarians are the most in touch with the needs of their communities, they have concerns about the ability of university presses to keep up with their needs. As mentioned before, it can take up to 2-3 years for a book to be published. In some fields, new, more relevant discoveries are being made that would make these books dated. Librarians who participated in the study with Ithaka expressed their feelings about presses and said that, “time is running out; they are anachronisms—far behind in their understanding of what

scholars need. They have not kept pace with scholarly communication” (Brown 18). The format of disseminating information is too slow and it is too difficult to reach. Readers want to go to one place to get their information. In short, not only have presses failed to keep touch with the needs of their universities, but they have also failed to keep with up the needs of scholarship as a whole.

### *Economic Concerns*

In addition to these communication problems, university libraries have other problems that are causing them to purchase less monographs from presses. The economy has affected presses such that the operational costs to publish a book are increasing. The economy is having a similar affect on university libraries. Their budgets are shrinking and they must split their budgets between buying journals and buying monographs (MLA Ad Hoc 172-73). Accordingly the price of journals has also risen dramatically. With the perception that librarians have of scholarly monographs, it is no surprise that, when it comes to considering how to apportion their budgets, librarians chose to increase their expenditures for journals and spend less to purchase monographs; in 1998, a study showed that libraries spent only 28% of their budgets on monographs and 72% on journals (173).

In addition to decreased library spending on monographs, presses must deal with the many other financial issues such as, “disappearance of [National Endowment of the Arts] and [National Endowment of the Humanities] grants...replacement of course books by course packs” (Pochoda, par. 6). Despite the cost cutting practices that university presses are utilizing—cutting unnecessary spending, laying off employees or freezing hiring new ones, etc.—it is still hard to make ends meet at the presses.



### *Effect on Scholarship*

In light of these economic concerns, other concessions are being made. Editors have to be much more discerning of the monographs that they publish. When I was doing my internship at Columbia University Press, I had the opportunity to sit in on an acquisitions meeting. It was early on in the program but what I observed helped to inform everything that I did at the press. Every project that was discussed involved a detailed analysis of the profitability and market for the monograph, the number of words and book pages, how popular and experienced an author was, and many other factors. In addition, editors placed emphasis on those books that appealed to many different areas or those that might be picked up for courses. Books that were too specialized tended to be avoided and those with wider appeal tended to be embraced. Presses look for monographs that have a wider market and thus a higher chance of being sold.

Where once university presses were the means for scholars to publish their academic works, the circumstances now create more rejection than success. So what options are left for those dissatisfied scholars and presses? With the advent of the internet, scholars and students have resorted to doing the bulk of their research on the web. While traditionally those in the academic community have shied away from trusting information that has been published on the web due to credibility concerns, the lure of a cheap, fast way to disseminate information has been too much for some presses to resist.

### The Digital Transition

#### *The Brief History of the E-book*

The beginning of the digital era began with a paradigm shift where people had to change their perceptions that reading could only be done in print format. Following the development of new computer technologies, computer-based reading systems were first developed in the 1960's

for engineering workstations (Renear 464). Because computers were not widely used for personal use, the shift towards reading being done in this new format spread slowly through our culture.

During the 1980s and 1990s, computer-based reading became more pronounced as developments in hardware and software for computers, word processors, and hypertext systems were being made (464). Word processors gave people the opportunity to write more quickly and easily. Due to the nature of computer memory and monitors, people could type their documents on their personal computers and easily edit their own works. With the introduction of the internet in the early 1990's, information was being shared and accessed by the masses. The further development of scanners and reading software led to books and other documents being converted to a basic digital format. The software company Adobe created programs that displayed the print format of "a page on a computer screen exactly as it appears on paper—in full color and with graphics in position" (Bowes 342-343). The document that is created from the reproduced print is called a portable document format, or PDF, which can be accessed in Adobe's Acrobat Reader and eBook Reader software.

While conceptually similar to the PDF, e-book technologies differ in that text is able to be accessed and extracted from the document, whereas PDFs are simply reproduced and inaccessible images. An e-book, or electronic book, is an electronic version of a printed book which can be read on a personal computer or hand-held device, generally referred to as an e-reader. Successful e-books are not simply recreations of the printed formats. They should also give an *added value* to the work, such as enhancing the text with multimedia, creating opportunities to search through a document, and connecting readers to author websites and titles or other pertinent information on the subject. A lot of this value is provided by the device which

e-books are accessed. E-Readers, such as the Rocket eBook, SoftBook, Sony Reader, Amazon Kindle, and Barnes & Noble Nook, are dedicated devices that allow for the downloading and storage of multiple e-books. Mobipocket is an e-reader program that works on PDAs.

Depending on the device, e-books can come in many different formats, including HTML, XML, PDF, .lit, .rb, .pb, .wap, etc. (Renear 486). The device typically dictates the kind of format that may be used, which can sometimes be confusing and deterring to consumers.

### *Why the E-book?*

As mentioned in the previous section, there are three big problems afflicting university press publishers: economic issues concerning increasing operational costs, decreased university support, and lack of communication with the university library about the needs of the readers. Digital publishing can help to answer these issues in a few different ways. William Kasdorf, the editor of The Columbia Guide to Digital Publishing, asserts that scholarly monographs lend themselves well to being published digitally. He states that, “monographs are generally simple in format and structure, making it easy to adapt them to various devices and technologies. They’re relatively small, so the cost to create an “electronic master” is low...They cost little to store and distribute” (Kasdorf 17). The electronic master is a digital form that can be universally converted to different formats like e-readers and, presumably, digital technologies not yet created.

They can also be used with print-on-demand (POD) technologies. Because monographs generally have print runs that run in the hundreds of copies, it is not always cost effective to print a given book. Offset printing, which uses individual plates engraved with the images of the book pages and then offsets the images onto paper, is expensive due to the cost to create the plates. Academic publishers are sensitive, therefore, to book length as more pages need more plates. It

costs less per each book unit for large print runs than for the small print runs standard in scholarly publishing as the set up costs are divided into more units. It is only cost effective to do offset printing for large print runs. POD, which is a form of digital printing that mimics the technology of the copy machine, costs more to print per unit but the price is pretty consistent no matter how many copies are printed (Kasdorf 16). Books are only printed on an “as needed” basis and this, coupled with the e-book format sales, eliminates the need for warehousing excess inventory. Returns of excess stock by bookstores are also no longer applicable, as POD books and e-books are only purchased as needed and cannot be returned. By both selling the book in e-book format and in print, there can be much savings in the production costs for scholarly titles to university presses.

Additionally, eventhough presses generally do not pay large advances or royalties, the high cost to publish a title is due to the large amount of overhead figured into the cost of each title. While the cost of sales will increase marginally to correspond to the cost to format the manuscript in digital form, the overhead does not change. Therefore, the revenue that the publisher receives from the sale of the e-book will go largely toward the profit of the book.

The relative price for an e-book compared to its print version can often be a plus for consumers. There are no typical prices which university press titles are sold at because there are many factors that go into determining *each* title’s price and they differ from book to book. It is, therefore, very difficult to compare globally the print price to the e-book price for titles. However, simply selecting any title that is sold in both formats from any university press list will be indicative of a trend that e-books are cheaper for consumers to buy than their print counterpart. For example, a randomly selected book on linguistic theory from the University of California sells in paperback, which is the primary format for scholarly monographs because it is

cheaper to produce, for \$24.95. The e-book format sells at \$15.95. Scholars and students who must buy these titles for research or for class may be attracted to the cost savings between formats.

In addition, selling in digital format to scholars and students helps to address the claims made by university libraries that university presses are failing to keep up with the research needs of their readers. It is widely acknowledged that most students and scholars will go to the internet first to conduct their research. By making e-books available for download, university presses are giving readers an easy and fast outlet for obtaining the research they need in the way that they know how to access it. While some presses sell their e-books through their websites, some presses are licensing their books to companies like netLibrary ([netlibrary.com](http://netlibrary.com)), which packages e-books by subject to sell to university libraries or library systems. There are also companies, like Baker and Taylor ([btol.com](http://btol.com)), who sell bundles of books to libraries in both digital and print formats (Kasdorf 17).

There are some notable examples of university presses that have examined the benefits and liabilities of publishing e-books and decided, for various reasons, to incorporate e-books into their operations. In March of 2009, the University of Michigan Press announced that they were shifting their scholarly publishing operations from print to digital (Jaschik, par. 1). The transition is expected to take around two years and “press officials expect well over 50 of the 60-plus monographs that the press publishes each year – currently in book form – to be released only in digital editions. Readers will still be able to use print-on-demand systems to produce versions” (Jaschik, par. 2). The benefits to such a move are found in the printing and distribution savings, which allows this money to be routed to developing other areas of operations. The press director, Phil Pochoda, is supported by the university provost, who believes that digital

publishing will help establish, “a business model more consistent with the university research goal to disseminate information as widely and as freely as possible” (Provenzano, par. 3). In attempting to disseminate information, the press is working with their university library to create a digitized catalog. The digitized copies of U-M titles would be available in POD. This move reflects a cohesive relationship between press, library, and university, with every member working to help accomplish the goals of the other members.

Some other presses are adopting digital operations at a more careful pace. In a press release announced on July 16, 2009, Harvard University Press announced plans, like their contemporaries New York University and MIT Press, to sell 1,000 digital books in conjunction with Scribd ([www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com)), a social publishing company (Stokes, par. 1). Similarly, the University of Chicago teamed up with Bibliovault ([www.bibliovault.com](http://www.bibliovault.com)) to make available 700 backlist titles in the Bibliovault depository (Reid, par. 5). This is only a small sampling of the different initiatives being taken by publishers to explore their digital options and how they are hoping to spread their titles in the online academic community.

#### *Why not the E-book?*

Despite the fact that many presses are choosing to incorporate e-books into their list of publishable formats, there are those from the academic community who are still concerned with the issue of digital legitimacy, which is the idea that information gathered online is not as trustworthy. The hang ups and concerns with format come from many fronts. While I have described the generation of researchers who go online to access the information they seek, there is still a generation in both the academic and scholarly publishing worlds that believe that the best way to access quality information is through books. They value being able to hold a book in

their hands to search through it for their research. There is distrust in the veracity of online information.

This viewpoint is influenced by the idea that digital legitimacy is being decreased by the abundance of online outlets available for people to publish freely their information and ideas on a subject—whether true or not. There are many examples of sites that people access for information that can be written by any person, including Wikipedia, blogs, messages boards, etc. The people that post information may not be qualified to do so and their information may be incorrect or distinctly biased. As more people are beginning to self-publish books online, this fear carries over and people worry about the academic integrity of the books they are downloading. While it may be easier to publish more titles and information, the worry might be that books from scholarly publishers will lack their editorial advantage, one of the strengths of scholarly books.

Also, readers are being bombarded by a wide assortment of e-readers. Many companies have developed their own e-readers, hoping to find that format that will be the frontrunner in the technology race. Each e-reader has its own format that it may access. While one press may use one e-reader format, another press may use another. There is no universality among formats yet, which makes it hard for both consumers and publishers to choose a common format that they prefer. As we move forward into the digital era of publishing, I believe that the best way to continue to progress is for university presses to come together and collaborate to become trendsetters in the academic community and to set the standards for digital publishing that are so badly needed.

The Future of Scholarly Publishing and the University Press

*Creating a Shared Digital Infrastructure*

One thing that is made increasingly clear is that all university presses are in this situation together. There is no press that is not affected by the problems of decreasing monograph sales, decreasing subsidies, decreasing university support, or increasing costs. Digital publishing is the next step in evolution for university presses and no press has the option of ignoring it. To do so would mean affirming the accusation by librarians that presses are becoming out of touch with the needs of their customers. If students and scholars want to get their information online, the university press community needs to figure out how to implement this in such a way that allows for universal usage and format for all university presses.

A possible solution could mean the creation of “a shared electronic publishing infrastructure that will save costs, build scale, leverage expertise, promote innovation, and integrate the productive resources of universities to maintain a robust, diverse and collaborative university publishing environment” (Brown 5). Working together with other presses keeps with the original missions of university presses: to promote and distribute scholarship while not focusing on the pursuit of wealth. This shared digital platform would help to set a format standard for all scholarly e-books and also gives them a place where they can be sold and accessed fairly. All presses working together to create this digital platform helps to preserve academic excellence and to enrich the general body of scholarly work. Major headway is already being made on this front.

The planning grant by the Carnegie Mellon Foundation goes a long way towards helping presses figure out what is needed to collaborate to establish a shared digital infrastructure to support the needs of all university presses—big and small. While not promising a short-term



solution to the economic problems plaguing presses, the grant, awarded to the presses of New York University, Rutgers, Temple and the University of Pennsylvania in July 2009, helps to deal with the long-term sustainability of a collaborative scholarly e-book program among many university presses and libraries (Reid, par. 2). The project aims at learning, “how to bring together a wide variety of university presses of different sizes—a minimum of ten presses at launch—in an e-book publishing program that would launch with at least 10,000 e-book titles and add five to 10 new UP’s each year over 5 years” (Reid, par. 3). There is also a focus on appealing to both supplying e-books to the library market and students. It also includes studying what payment and delivery models would work best in the implementation of this program. This type of program would be similar to JSTOR and Project Muse, which are journal platforms, where the costs are shared between the member journals.

One other important aspect about JSTOR and Project Muse is that they have become very well known in the academic community. Assuming that all the grant objectives are fulfilled, the creation of this shared infrastructure may provide the brand power needed to give digital scholarly books credibility. All university presses would finally have a standard format, meaning that scholars and students alike would only have to worry about accessing their downloaded e-books in one way. Each press, however, would still be responsible for developing their own editorial content and formatting it to the standards specified by the project. Each press is identified by the subjects that they publish and their qualities of refinement, selection, and marketing, which should never be part of the collaborative project (Freeman 152). Each university press, as a representative of their university and its scholarship, is its own brand that must be maintained.

*Reconnecting the University Press to the University and University Library*

University presses have the opportunity to do a great service to their university library by offering for either no cost or minimal cost their entire collection of e-book titles to enrich their catalog. In this way, the university library is built up and also enriched, which improves the quality of academic work being done by the faculty and students. Doing so helps to create goodwill with both the university library and the university.

University presses also have the opportunity to publish more titles by professors seeking tenure. Sometimes, professors may submit manuscripts that are well-written and rich in knowledge but are rejected because the book may not sell well enough to justify the printing costs of the title. However, these titles may be sold well as e-books and through POD. To do so helps professors who may normally fall victim to the “publish or perish” practice. This also gives the press a chance to publish more titles by professors from their own university and helps to ingratiate them with their parent university. While it is impossible and also undesirable to publish all of the academic work that is submitted, editors at university presses, who know the breadth of work that is being conducted in their subjects, have a little more opportunity to promote works that they may deem important.

*A Complete Solution*

The ideal situation is being implemented at the University of Michigan where press, library, and university are all coming together to accomplish the university and library’s research and scholarship goals as well as the press’s goal of digitizing their books to sell online and through POD. Each member supports the other. The only step that is left is to integrate the work of the University of Michigan press into digital infrastructure collaboration. By collaborating,

U-M can share its successes, failures, strategies, and technologies with the rest of the scholarly publishing community.

*Conclusion*

I am very thankful for the time that I spent interning at Columbia University Press. In general, it helped me to understand on a more tangible level the problems that are afflicting, not just scholarly publishing, but all of publishing. University presses have been around since the 1400's, which alludes to the importance and value of the books that they publish. However, the problems of increasing operational costs, decreased university support, and lack of communication with the university library about the needs of the readers are causing scholarly publishers to worry about their continued operation. New technologies, while possibly capable of helping to ease the financial burden upon these publishers, is relatively unexplored and not understood. However, publishers such as the University of Michigan, Harvard University, and many others are helping to navigate the way through the digital minefield. Their successes and failures will help to shape the digital future in terms of content and format. Through the collaborative use of e-books and an e-book platform, publishers will work together to ensure the industry's survival and conquering of the new digital era.

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