Libraries as Publishers: New Roles for Libraries

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The imposing structure dominating campus life, the university library, may still seem synonymous with a university education for many students, but its future as something more than just a glorified Starbucks with printing services is looking less and less assured. With the rapid growth of digitized resources such as online databases delivering full text articles and, increasingly, e-books to faculty and students' desktops, it is not unthinkable that the library, as we traditionally conceive it, could find itself relegated in the 21st century to merely a holding space for those last remaining special collections, rare books, and archival materials that have yet to assume new lives in digital form. Is the library destined to be an archaism of the 19th and early 20th century, a pilgrimage site just for researchers with grant money to burn, while the daily activities of scholarly research operate silently and invisibly in the electronic offices students and faculty? Will the library of the future end up being little more than an institutional *budget* for licensing pre-selected bundles of scholarly offerings from an ever-shrinking number of centrally consolidated database vendors?

Implicit in these questions is how this shift toward an increasingly digital environment is leading many of the librarian's core competencies and responsibilities to become outsourced to the commercial world. The purchasing of bundled journals through Big Deal subscriptions such as Science Direct, IDEAL, InterScience and Emerald, the near monopoly on book sales channels by the large publisher imprints, the centralization of indexing through the library of Congress, the now global ability to download and share catalogue holdings through OCLC, off-site hosting and preservation of electronic materials on commercially-run servers, not to mention the new, intermediate forms of scholarly

communication arising from technological developments that have increased scholars' ability to communicate and collaborate but whose products do not fit neatly into established information hierarchies and documentation categories - all of these factors are putting pressure on the library's traditional role as curator and custodian of scholarly research, which Mary Marlino and Tamara Sumner have summarized in terms of "organizing and providing access to information, curating and preserving special collections, and creating physical spaces for collaboration and scholarship."[1]

One might ask oneself whether the scholarly community will exist without libraries in the foreseeable future? Will these transformations in technology, media and scholarly cultures inevitably lead to the declining importance or 'irrelevance' of the library, or can they perhaps be envisioned in terms of what Ajit Pyati has called a greater "democratic participation of libraries"? By this Pyati has in mind the library as an "active shaper" of technology for the democratic and progressive end of increased information access for all. Integral to this vision is an *expansion* rather than contraction in library roles, particularly in the realm of knowledge dissemination. In this view, which is shared by Karla Hahn, Director of the Office of Scholarly Communication for the ARL, libraries could assume a role and responsibility further up the research chain and participate in the scholarly communication taking place during the research process itself rather than, as presently, "sitting at the end of the line behind the publishing part."[2]

One university library that has already embraced this vision of more active participation in the research process is the University of Michigan library. In 2001, UML opened the Scholarly Publishing

1 Mary Marlino and Tamara Sumner, "From the library to the Laboratory: A New Future for the Science Librarian?" in The *Tower and the Cloud: Higher Education in the Age of Computing*, ed. Richard N. Katz (Educause, 2009), 190-96; p. 190.

2 Karla Hahn interviewed by Gerry Bayne, "Publishing Services: An Emerging Role for Research Libraries," EDUCAUSE Review, vol. 43, no. 6 (November/December 2008).

Office (SPO) as a division of the library. Its mission is to "extend the library's commitment to the distribution of scholarship by experimenting with innovative methods for publishing to serve the needs of scholars."[3] According to its promotional materials, SPO uses digital technologies to publish nearly 20 journals and conference proceedings, monographs under its own imprint, an imprint in collaboration with the University of Michigan Press. SPO also offers a hosting service for subscription-based resources such as the ACLS Humanities E-book project, and a reprints service from the library's digital collection numbering over 9000 titles. In 2008, the Shapiro library installed an Espresso book-printing machine for servicing print on demand requests, turning the UM library into a one-stop-shop for the conversion, digitization and delivery of scholarly materials.

SPO is just one of a number of library-based publishing units seeking to make scholarly communication more sustainable and scalable in a digital world. Reflecting their awareness of this, a number of university presses are increasingly turning to library-based publishing collaborations as a way reducing their costs. Examples include Athabasca University Press; Clemson University Digital Press; Linköping University Electronic Press, Sweden; Praxis (e)Press, University of British Columbia; Singapore E-press; University of Texas, Houston Electronic Press; university e-presses at ANU, Monash, Sydney, and UTSePress; HighWire Press, Stanford University; Swinburne Online Journals, Australia, Göttingen University Press, Leiden University Press. What makes SPO unique among these other library-based e-presses is its complete freedom from institutional constraints and limitations on subject matter. Where many of the publishers mentioned above are tasked solely with publishing the work of their own faculty, with some such as Leiden and Göttingen having additional missions to publish in areas where the library collection or faculty expertise is particularly strong, SPO imposes no restrictions

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3 "Scalable Electronic Publishing in a University library" <http://www.ultraslavonic.info/preprints/20080627.pdf> [accessed April 7, 2009].

on either the institutional origin of the author or on the subject matter it publishes. Instead, SPO partners with groups that provide their own editorial mechanisms for determining what content should be published such as the University of Michigan Press, and the scholar-led open access publishing initiative Open Humanities Press, an international grass-roots collaboration between humanities scholars, librarians and technologists that will begin publishing monographs in critical and cultural theory in collaboration with SPO this year.

Library-based publishing units such as SPO have been made possible by and emerged directly as a result of the new information technologies which are transforming the scholarly communications landscape. With the development of open source software such as the Public Knowledge Project suite of publishing applications based at Simon Fraser University library in Canada, any scholar in any country of the world today can found an online scholarly journal with very little technical expertise and virtually no capital outlay. As libraries such as UM and the California Digital library expand their traditional offerings to meet faculty and students' new needs in the contemporary information environment by offering services such as journal hosting facilities, achieving Pyati's vision of the library as promoting enhanced and more democratic access to information seems feasible, but only if the academic and library cultures are able to adapt to the new environments and transform their understandings of their traditional missions to fully embrace the opportunities ICT presents. For faculty, the greatest challenge will be to accept digital forms of scholarship as legitimate and credible publications and fold these successfully into established systems of rewards and recognition that have traditionally privileged the print form. For librarians, the chief challenge will be to look beyond their habitual focus on the institution and assume a proactive role in developing a collaborative, global response to the crisis in scholarly communications.

Both will admittedly require significant cultural shifts and these are unlikely to happen overnight.

In particular, the institutional focus of the library is deeply ingrained in academic culture, comprising a major part of a university's public identity. Frequently, the size, extent and specialization of library holdings are factored into consideration in a student's decision about which university to attend, becoming an integral part of a university's ability to compete for fee-paying students. Nevertheless, my belief is that the increased collaboration opportunities and sharing of scholarly resources made possible by a digital world supports a core professional value of the library mission to facilitate scholarly communication. As Yochai Benkler reminds us, scholarship is first and foremost a structured *conversation*.[4] If the library's role is to meet and service the needs of that scholarly conversation, it must find ways of adapting to scholars' changing modes of communicating with one another.

In closing, let me suggest that one of the most critical ways that the library can continue to play a central role in the scholarly community is to act as what Benkler calls an "anchor" against commercial incentives to build walls around scholarship that shut out participants and inhibit the flow of the scholarly communication (Benkler, p. 61). A number of studies have indicated the negative follow-on effects of increased corporate control over scholarly discourse, particularly in fields that rely on the long argument or book form as their preferred mode of knowledge dissemination.[5] Young scholars in humanities disciplines are discovering that, in their attempts to expand the market for their publications, publishers are frequently more receptive to proposals for undergraduate readers, edited collections and monographs dealing with several authors and broader themes. This contrasts with the in-depth analysis of a single writer that dominated scholarship in the past and which still holds the most weight in hiring and tenure considerations. The general contraction in publishers lists in the humanities over the past 20

4 Yochai Benkler, "The University in the Networked Economy and Society: Challenges and Opportunities," in The Tower and the Cloud, pp. 51-61; p. 55.

5 See for example John Willinsky's summation of the state of the monograph in "Toward the Design of an Open Monograph Press," *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 12.1 (2000).

years has been well-documented, resulting in public calls by well-known scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt for humanities departments to formally address what has become known as the 'monographs crisis'[6]: the vicious circle that has emerged from departments' reliance on book publication for hiring and tenure purposes and the reluctance of publishers to give contracts to all but well-established scholars whose books can be assumed to break even, if not actually turn a profit.

Benkler argues that as we shift into a networked information economy, "the distinct values of the university—its relative freedom from the pressures of the market, polity, and popular fashion—are a major source of strength," asserting that "universities can become an even more significant force in the knowledge production system, one that distinctly pulls in the direction of professional values" (Benkler, p. 61). Could the library of the future play more than a supporting role in preserving the university's historical independence from market pressures in the production of knowledge in a way that takes fullest advantage of the networked environment? In this vision, libraries would form partnerships with scholars and with one another to provide shared publication services that are appropriate to the needs and cultures of different academic disciplines.[7] The low cost of Internet publication enables libraries to make these materials open access, that is, available free of charge and free of most licensing and copyright restrictions. With library collections budgets globally becoming freed up by the ready availability of scholarly materials on the web, a new, 'virtuous circle' of scholarly research and dissemination could emerge where the collective library purchasing power would be dedicated to the production of *new* scholarship instead of the current duplication of essentially the same collections in many libraries worldwide. Scholars would once more be freed from the constraints of 'marketability' to

6 Stephen Greenblatt, "A Special Letter from Stephen Greenblatt," Modern Language Association, 28 May 2002 <http://www.mla.org/scholarly_pub>

7 Because of its emphasis on high prestige publications, humanities scholarship is unlikely to fully embrace the open access solutions represented by self-archiving and library-based Institutional Repositories.

pursue purely scholarly objectives in their research, and academic judgments concerning a scholar's merit would be returned to those who are best placed to make such judgments, a scholar's peers.

One clear sign that this vision of the library as publisher is becoming a reality is the recent change in status of the University of Michigan Press In March 2009, the University of Michigan Press converted from a "financially self-sustaining university unit" to a department inside the University of Michigan library. Among their stated plans is the digitization of the UMP backlist which will be made freely available in open access.[8] UMP thus joins the growing number of presses that are reporting directly to deans of libraries such as the MIT Press and New York University Press. Given the new opportunities for dissemination presented by the digital revolution, a transformation the scholarly communications landscape is inevitable; the opportunities for reimagining the library at the front, back and center of the scholarly conversation are equally exciting.

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8 Press release, "U-M redefining scholarly publications in the digital age" <http://www.ur.umich.edu/0809/Mar23_09/05.php>

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