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The Value of Publishing: What's Worth Paying For?

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

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The Value of Publishing: What's Worth Paying For?

by Nancy L. Maron (President, BlueSky to BluePrint) <nancy@blueskytoblueprint.com>

We spend a lot of time talking about how books are expensive: on one hand, to produce, to distribute, to preserve and on the other, to buy. The question of cost has been particularly important recently, as publishers of monographs experiment with ways to adopt the open access models popular with journals. And it's a delicate topic: monograph publishing has largely resisted OA models, despite sometimes heated rhetoric from OA advocates. (One conference presentation a few years ago underlined the revolutionary nature of the movement by featuring an image of **Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People**, though the tone has cooled somewhat since then.)

Not that there hasn't been interest in OA, particularly from university presses. Com-

munity-based organizations like **Knowledge Unlatched** have jumped into this space with a model that permits university presses to test the waters with a few titles. Others, like **UCP**, have developed models of their own. But many publishers still wonder if an "open" model can compensate them for the effort each book requires to publish.



So, what exactly does it cost? A study my colleagues and I conducted with funding from **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** demonstrated that even if you include only staff time and direct expenses, spending per book averaged between \$22,559 at the smallest presses and \$34,686 at the largest ones. These figures rose substantially when we included overheads like technology development and support, legal, and finance.¹

The findings raise two key questions: Why does it cost that much to publish monographs today? And, *does it need to be that way?*

The essays included here all speak to the more qualitative side of the business of publishing. What is the substance of this work that takes so much time, and ends up costing so much? Noting that acquisitions work can take years is fine, but what does that really mean? Certain key elements in scholarly publishing — peer review is a perfect example² — must be clarified to have real meaning: the peer review conducted by an OA STEM journal publisher is unlikely to be the same process, for the same ends, at the same cost, as the process undertaken by a scholarly book publisher reviewing an important new work in an emerging field. When publishers, funders, university administrators and library-based publications programs start talking about the "cost" of publishing, it's

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If Rumors Were Horses

It's 2017! Can you believe it? A happy and prosperous year to all of us!

After 40 years, **Bruce** and I have moved from the Citadel. Heart-wrenching! Our new address will be PO Box 799, Sullivan's Island, SC 29482. Street address is 1712 Thompson Avenue, Sullivan's Island, SC 29482 but we prefer mail to our PO Box please!



Ann Okerson snapped this photo of **Chuck Hamaker** on his birthday during the **2016 Charleston Conference**. We hope your birthday was fabulous, **Chuck!**

Sullivan's is only 15 minutes from downtown so not much will change but the address. I will use my cell phone (843-509-2848) and the same landline (843-723-3536). The fax line is not operational right now so please scan or email if at all possible.

Hot off the press!!! **The Charleston Conference dates for 2017 have changed slightly.** Due to an egregious scheduling error on the part of the **Gaillard Center**, we are forced to move the conference dates up by one day. The **preconferences will now be held on Monday and Tuesday, 11/6 and 11/7**, the **Vendor Showcase will be on Tuesday, 11/7**, and the **main conference will run Wednesday through Friday, 11/8 - 11/10. We have not changed dates for future years!**

And **Ann Okerson's liblicense-I** has completed 20 years of publication. January 2017 will begin the 21st year! Congratulations to **Ann** and the **Liblicense** team!

Heather Ruland Staines has started the new year in a new position! She is now at **Hypothes.is** a startup which brings a new layer to the web helping us to discuss, collaborate, and organize research and take personal notes. Try it out. It looks pretty cool and useful! Congratulations, **Heather!** <https://hypothes.is>

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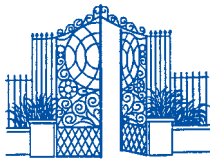
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worth making sure we are comparing apples to apples, and not throwing the oranges out with the bathwater.

From “Cost” to Value: What is Worth Paying For?

Contributors to this issue each address a specific function of book publishing today. Authors were challenged not to “justify” the work they do today, but to imagine a world with monographs in digital and open access formats. What changes would their work require? Could it be done differently? What elements of publishing might be able to go, and which should be defended at all costs?

Publishing starts with acquisitions work, as editors determine which books a press publishes, how the works are identified and/or developed over time. **Dennis Lloyd**, Director at the **University of Wisconsin Press**, highlights the value the publisher plays in “sifting and winnowing,” by mercifully narrowing down the pool of material, so that readers can more quickly identify the works most suited to them. **Richard Carlin**, Executive Editor at **Oxford University Press**, published author, and veteran of presses large and less large, offers a glimpse into the intensive work involved in seeking out and shaping a strong thematic list of titles over time, with the reputation and reach to support existing authors and to attract new ones.

Jenya Weinreb, Managing Editor of **Yale University Press**, brings us into the ring, so to speak, to observe the collegial *mano a mano* many press staff have with their authors as they work together on the substance of a manuscript. Copyediting — another term often wrongly interpreted as little more than proofreading — here receives graceful treatment, explained as an intimate process whereby copyeditors coax the text and its authors to greater clarity.

As scholarly books move to a digital-first environment, Press Directors are actively hoping to understand which elements might be economized, in the service of cost and time savings. **John Sherer**, Spangler Family Director of **The University of North Carolina Press**, provocatively argues that dust jackets and perhaps cover art itself may well become a thing of the past, as other means of discovery — metadata-led search, reader referral, and so forth — are increasingly important in an online environment.

The *Costs of Publishing Monographs* study made sure to capture activities including marketing and distribution (with the exception of print books, and activities tied only to sales). Here, contributions illuminate some hidden values of marketing, vital even in an OA environment. **Kathryn Conrad**, Director of **The University of Arizona Press**, offers the moving example of a campaign for an academic book that served as a bridge to the Mexican American community in Tucson. True, community events and outreach may generate sales, but what began as a book release party developed momentum that led to

further research as well as works of theater, public discourse and community building, a mission-based bulls-eye.

Jessica Lawrence-Hurt, International & Institutional Sales & Marketing Manager at **The MIT Press** takes us to the outer limits of imagining how existing sales infrastructure can still be highly relevant even in a post-sales world. Writing about distribution channels, she makes a compelling case for this as a key strategy for making sure that new scholarship finds its audience locally and globally. She notes that the pressure of having to make the case for why a sales rep should pitch it to a bookseller, why a bookseller ought to purchase copies for their shop, why a customer ought to make the choice to purchase the book — is a process of iteration, ongoing refinement based on market feedback that helps to improve the value of the work to its audience.

Digital formats hold out the opportunity for great innovations, but these are not always accompanied by cost savings. Rather, **Susan Doerr**, Assistant Director, Digital Publishing and Operations Manager of **The University of Minnesota Press**, describes both the pleasures and constraints she has witnessed in implementing Manifold, a browser-based publishing platform. Along with the enticing potential to include more and varied media, she describes the additional time and cost required for metadata creation and rights clearance, suggesting that boundless may not always be better.

Becky Brasington Clark, Director of the **Library of Congress Publishing Office**, shares with us the importance of building books to be accessible to those with disabilities, the challenges that can face publishers undertaking this, and some practical guidance for those just getting started. Here, too, she sees the benefits as potentially vast, but cost savings is not likely to be among them.

Finally, **Carey Newman**, Director of **Baylor University Press**, throws caution to the wind with a full-throated appeal for the pleasures of the book. He takes us back to when publishers were printers and books were precious objects, when publishers “lavished attention on covers, font, leading, gutters, margins, headers, trim sizes. Publishers have long labored over prefaces, introductions, prose, notes, and conclusions.” He argues that even today, “Publishing is not technology, though it employs technology. Publishing is not a business, though it depends on money. Publishing is art.”

Reconciling Art and Business: The Future of Scholarly Book Publishing

It seems to me that there are a few ways forward, both for those already in the publishing business and those just getting started:

- Existing publishers may want to re-assess the effort they are spending on different parts of their lists in light of the aims of those lists. Discussions at the 20 presses in the study suggested that staff in many roles want to devote the same level of craft to all the books they produce and see

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Column Editor: **Bruce Strauch** (Retired, The Citadel)

Editor's Note: Hey, are y'all reading this? If you know of an article that should be called to *Against the Grain's* attention ... send an email to <kstrauch@comcast.net>. We're listening! — **KS**

BOOKSTORE ON SANTORINI by Bruce Strauch (Retired, The Citadel)

Unbelievable. In 2002, a pair of college juniors got the wild idea of opening an independent bookstore on the Greek island of Santorini. They did it, and it's still alive. It sits on a promontory below a crumbling Venetian castle.

Atlantis Books is an island institution and known world-wide. You can crash there if you work in the store. The model is **Shakespeare and Co.** on the Rue Dauphine in Paris.

Of course it wasn't easily done. The number of owners expanded to four including a girl who later married one. There was layers of Greek bureaucracy, in-fighting and prat-falls. And of course it didn't turn a profit.

Then they hit upon the idea of small postcard sized booklet reprints of famous short stories, and **Paravion Press** was born. It was an artisanal hit with tourists.

Now everyone is 35 and wondering whither **Atlantis Books**.

See — **David Kamp**, "The Accidental Bookshop," *Vanity Fair*, Dec. 2016, p.112.

YOU'VE READ THE BOOK; NOW MEET THE AUTHOR by Bruce Strauch (Retired, The Citadel)

Goodnight Moon was published in 1947 and has been adored ever since. 14 million copies sold. The wild author, on the other hand, is forgotten.

Margaret Wise Brown was a bi-sexual beauty who never married, a rabbit hunter who penned *The Runaway Bunny*, and a prolific writer who changed the face of modern picture books.

Amy Grant has a new biography of her — *In the Great Green Room*. **Margaret** was born rich, and as typical of the times, ignored by her parents. Boarding schools, **Hollins College**, Great Neck, Maine summer house. Later Upper East Side of New York with her lady lover. She wanted to be a serious author but her talent was children's books. But she didn't like children.

But she could write. *The Runaway Bunny* she composed while skiing and wrote it down on her ski receipt. Her normal preference was a quill pen.

See — **Susannah Cahalan**, "*Goodnight Moon* author was a bisexual rebel who didn't like kids," *The New York Post*, Jan. 7, 2017, n.p.



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this as a mark of quality. For which titles is the "art" of publishing in fact a business necessity? In which cases might it be less important?

- One possible first step is a close assessment of where a press' costs lie today. My colleague **Kim Schmelzinger** and I developed a Monograph Costing Tool³ for the **AAUP** that permits publishers to study a group of already-published titles, by examining staff time, direct costs and overheads.
- For those publishers just getting started and considering OA models, it will be worth considering which of the values of the full publishing acquisitions — development — production — design — promotion — distribution cycle are worth maintaining and investing in. Some may seem to be "sales-related" but also have deep mission-based value. Which ones will help advance the ultimate aim of creating new works of scholarship? Which will insure that those works of scholarship are of highest quality, are well-produced,

and are found and enjoyed by the readers who need them?

- Publishers will want to define for themselves which books will be better served via an OA-subsidy model, and which they prefer to develop and sell. An obvious way would be to determine which titles are the ones that will ultimately cost more than they generate. Deciding this is notoriously difficult. (Publisher: "About half my books break even or better; the other half lose money." Critic: "Why not only publish the half that sell?" Rimshot.) Scholarly books have a notoriously slow fuse. Some may take a few seasons to start to catch on, perhaps as course adoption titles. Those that do may continue to sell well for years. None of this may be at all obvious at the start. Still, it may be necessary to define a type of book for which a quick and efficient distribution method is valuable, and perhaps sufficient. For titles a publisher sees as diamonds in the rough, and sees the potential in a deeper investment, they may choose a different path.

The next few years will be a fascinating time, as publishers of all types wrestle with the tensions of sharing scholarship as broadly

as possible, while still retaining the high qualities that authors and their readers appreciate. The essays in this collection highlight just a few of the values that publishing activities and their practitioners offer to the scholarly lifecycle. As scholars, publishers, librarians and all others in the scholarly communications chain continue to experiment with new formats, new business models, and new organizational structures, coming back to a discussion of the value of the various activities that together constitute "publishing" may be a good way to avoid decisions that are made based on spreadsheets alone. 🐼

Endnotes

1. **Maron** et al, "The Costs of Publishing Monographs: Toward a Transparent Methodology," *Journal of Electronic Publishing*, Volume 19, Issue 1: Economics of Publishing, Summer 2016), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0019.103>.
2. **Mick Gusinde-Duffy**, "Why Peer Review is the Worst Form of Quality Control and Credentialing Except All Those Other Forms that Have Been Tried From Time to Time," *Against the Grain*, v.28#4, September 2016, page 75.
3. **Maron** and **Schmelzinger**, "Monograph Costing Tool" (AAUP, 2016). <http://www.aaupnet.org/resources/for-members/hand-books-and-toolkits/digital-monograph-costing-tool>