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Are Economic Pressures on University Press Acquisitions Quietly Changing the Shape of the Scholarly Record?

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Abstract

The monograph remains central to humanities and qualitative social science (HSS) research as the form most suitable for the long-form argument and, crucially, as foundational to the tenure process in these fields. University and other scholarly presses have played a vital role in supporting the publication of scholarly monographs where such narrow research is not seen as being as commercially viable as, for example, journals. While there appears to be an erosion of traditional revenue streams, new funding models are not yet recuperating costs for scholarly monographs. Library budgets continue to tighten, with new collection strategies taking hold, putting strain on monograph purchasing where libraries were central supporters of the form. We wanted to know what these economic pressures meant for the ways in which editors at university and other scholarly presses choose to acquire books. Recent research has addressed the impact of cooperative library purchasing, the role of American university presses in shaping the monograph, effects of new business models and approaches to access, and the costs of producing scholarly monographs. But there has been little exploration into editorial practices as a part of this larger ecosystem. This paper presents preliminary results from a pilot study exploring the connection between revenue, the economics of publishing scholarly monographs, and the behaviors and choices of acquisitions editors.

Scholarly Monographs and University Presses

The scholarly monograph remains an essential form through which to publish research in the humanities and qualitative social sciences (HSS). Tenure and promotion processes continue to affirm the value of the format to these disciplines, where no other form has been as enduring and stable. Broadly defined, the monograph is “a work of scholarship on a particular topic or theme which is written by a scholar (or scholars) and is intended for use primarily by other scholars” (Thompson, 2005, pp. 4–85). It is narrowly focused and necessarily long, well beyond the length of a journal article, allowing for a comprehensive scope. While there are ongoing experiments with medium-format works, such as Palgrave’s Pivot program, the monograph has, in general, not lost its primacy as a way to synthesize and present research in HSS. The consistency of the format over time has been beneficial for libraries and for long-term preservation.

There has been much recent discussion about the crisis of scholarly monograph publishing, but it

would be naïve to say that the economic pressures shaping scholarly monograph publishing are entirely new. Research has very often moved in directions where research funding has been available, guided by who is securing that funding, and thereby how publishable output is supported. But it’s fair to say that there have been changes that are disrupting the landscape. While Open Access is placing increasing pressure on traditional publishers, long-term, viable solutions for supporting the costs of monograph publishing on an open access basis have yet to fully emerge. Piracy, large scale, is supported through sites like SciHub, which, while primarily concerned with STEM research, also includes scholarly monographs in the humanities.

University presses have played a particularly vital role in sustaining the monograph within the American academic publication landscape, where large commercial presses have historically divested from publishing these low-earning, generally low-use specialist works. As Amy Brand, director at MIT Press, notes:

Each year, members of the Association of University Presses publish approximately 15,000 books of scholarly, intellectual, or creative merit (Esposito, 2017). With higher education, science, and the notion of truth itself under attack in many parts of the world today, the university press' commitment to the integrity of the knowledge creation and sharing enterprise has renewed urgency and relevance. (2018, 306)

University presses remain mission driven, connected to the pursuit of scholarship in ways that commercial presses cannot be. As one respondent in our study, who had worked in university press publishing for 26 years, noted: *"Our jobs are to help scholars advance their fields of research and inquiry, not to make money. If we can gain efficiencies that let us break even that is a bonus. But at this press, the mission comes first."* At the same time, they operate and compete within the same market: The history of university presses shows not "a bilateral relationship between presses and the academy, but a quadrilateral one that also involves commercial publishing and external funding organizations" (Meisel, 2010, pp. 124–125).

University libraries, as institutions that supported a boom in monograph production in the second half of the 20th century through their collection development practices, have seen budgets decline, in particular where endowments were slow to recover after the 2008 financial crisis. STEM journals packages take up a larger portion of this budget, with big deals and year after year price increases, leaving less for scholarly monograph purchasing. In addition, digital presents a challenge in choosing between formats, since purchase of duplicate print and e-book editions is not feasible for most libraries. It has also meant an acceleration of "just in time" collecting, since, with a digital copy, books are now never out of print.

While books are selling fewer copies, the costs of publication remain high. The Maron, Schmelzinger, Mulhern, and Rossman (2016) study places the full costs of production for a single monograph at somewhere between \$15,140 and—at the top end in disciplines, for example, where full-color illustrations are integral—\$129,909. In general, these costs are not fully recuperated by presses through sales. Subventions and other open access funds, while increasing, do not yet present themselves as long-term viable models, particularly for sustaining high-cost works.

In moving from a traditional model that relies on the market to support scholarly monographs, to one funded through subventions, the *AAU-ARL Prospectus for an Institutionally Funded First-Book Subvention* argues:

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many presses are forced to turn away a significant number of manuscripts they might otherwise consider worthy of publication. Because a market model requires publishers to make publishing decisions based (at least in part) on commercial viability, rather than solely on scholarly merit, some fields—including art history, literary criticism, non-Western history, and interdisciplinary studies—are underserved, while highly specialized fields can be effectively precluded from publication altogether. (2014)

We were interested to know whether data does in fact support this anecdotal evidence about the way the market influences acquisitions decisions at scholarly and university presses. To begin to understand what is happening at the acquisitions level and the roles editors play in shaping the future of the scholarly monograph, we began with a pilot survey, as well as gathering some revenue data from relevant presses. This paper presents selected results from this preliminary research into the connection between economic pressures and scholarly and university press acquisitions behaviors and decisions. Due to the limited space here, this paper only covers some of the general trends from the survey we conducted and the revenue data we analyzed.

Bringing Acquisitions Editors into the Picture

The Maron et al. (2016) study notes that staff time related to acquisitions is both the defining factor in a press's "character and reputation" and the largest cost item:

Regardless of group type, the largest cost item for university presses is staff time, specifically the time related to activities of *acquisitions, the area most closely tied to the character and reputation of the press*. This activity is least likely to be outsourced, and considered to be closely tied to its financial success: acquisitions editors being the ones with the skill, subject expertise, and relationships needed to attract the most promising authors and topics to the press. (Maron et al., 2016; emphasis added)

To begin to understand more clearly the role acquisitions editors and editorial directors are playing in shaping the scholarly monograph, these central questions guided our study: How are economic pressures on the university presses affecting monograph publication? And more specifically: Are guidelines, incentives, priorities, workflows for acquisitions editors changing in a context of falling monograph sales? The research and findings presented here are preliminary.

We conducted this study in two parts: The quantitative piece looks at sales and acquisitions data from five publishers. We requested data from a selection of university presses and one commercial publisher with a heavily monographic list also contributed data. The qualitative study was based at Cornell and centered on a survey of editorial directors and acquisition editors. The survey included 27 questions on various aspects of the acquisitions process and pertained to the status of the scholarly monograph and the edited volume; we asked respondents to exclude handbooks, reference works, trade books, and other formats from their consideration. The survey announcement was then e-mailed directly to more than 400 individual e-mail addresses of university press editors as well as to an acquisitions listserv sponsored by the Association of University Presses (AUP-ACQ), and the survey was also distributed internally to one commercial publisher of scholarly monographs. We received 101 responses.

The survey was anonymous and we did not seek to limit the number of editors responding from any single press. Nor did the survey include a way to group responses by press. We asked respondents to identify their role—as acquiring editors, as editorial directors/editors-in-chief, or as editorial directors who also serve a direct acquisitions role. Twenty-three respondents identified themselves as editorial directors/editors-in-chief; 15 specified only that role; and 8 said they also acquired books in a particular subject area. We take this as an indication that we heard from at least 23 individual presses—likely more, since we may have received responses from acquiring editors at a press without the editorial director from that press having responded to the survey.

Though we made a point of keeping survey results anonymous—for individual editors and for the presses themselves—we asked respondents to identify their press by size, according to the revenue tiers defined by the Association of University Presses. We received a reasonably even number of responses from each press level: 24 responses from

Group 4 presses (annual revenue over \$6 million); 23 responses from Group 3 presses (annual revenue between \$3 and \$6 million); 22 responses from Group 2 presses (annual revenue between \$1.5 and \$3 million); and 23 responses from Group 1 presses (annual revenue up to \$1.5 million). Nine responses did not list an AUP group.

We asked editors to indicate the subject areas in which they acquire. We provided a list of 16 subjects, corresponding to the categories we used in the quantitative sales and acquisitions analysis: Linguistics, Classical and Near Eastern Studies, Art, Philosophy, Urban Studies, Jewish Studies, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science, Film Studies, Theology & Religion, Sociology, Gender/Sexuality Studies, Literary Studies, Cultural Studies, History, and finally an “Other” category where we provided the option of a free-text field to collect subject areas. Editors could choose more than one area. The area covered by the fewest editors was Linguistics. The most commonly chosen subject areas were History with 51 and “Other” with 55. Survey feedback suggests that we will need to reconsider how we approach subject areas in further research. We excluded STEM subjects in our focus on HSS, but responses revealed that due to the particularly interdisciplinary nature of acquisitions at university presses, narrowing the subject areas meant putting aside the complex interplay of subjects at most presses.

The above concern is particularly important in considering another finding: that focusing on individual monographs, or even monographs particularly, ignores the fact that editors constantly balance their lists to ensure that monographs, as work with highly scholarly value but declining sales, are supported. They are often asked to acquire more books that will bring in higher revenue in order to sustain monograph publishing.

We asked for estimates of presses’ average print runs for monographs and how this has changed over time. Print monograph sales have dropped sharply and steadily over the past several years. At least in part, shrinking print runs reflect falling sales expectations, and that was confirmed in our survey responses from editorial directors: the smaller the press, the more dramatic the drop in print run. Group 4 presses reported a 35% drop in print run from 10 years ago; Group 1 presses: a 62% drop.

In this context, we were somewhat surprised by responses estimating the percentage of frontlist

monographs that are currently produced as print-on-demand, according to editorial directors. On average, the Group 4 editorial directors reported that only 2% of their frontlist is POD, while smaller UPs were in the 30–40% range. But in light of what editors say about falling and unpredictable print sales, it's notable across the board that print-on-demand for the frontlist has not been more widely adopted. This is an area that we plan to explore further in our ongoing research.

Striking too is the relatively small share of monograph sales revenue that editors from presses of all sizes told us that e-books represent: between 12% (for Group 1 respondents) and 22% (for Group 3). These estimates include e-book sales on every type of platform: publishers' own platforms (for those presses that have them), aggregator platforms on which e-books are licensed to libraries, and Kindle and other ePub editions sold to individual readers. Here, it will be beneficial in our next study to examine revenue data more closely and interview presses about e-book sales.

We asked editors if their presses are actively acquiring monographs as part of an open access program or planning to begin doing so over the next two years. Again, focusing only on the 23 editorial directors responding: 11 said they have no OA program for frontlist monographs and indicated no plans to start one in the near term; 7 said they have an OA program currently; 4 said they were planning one; and 1 was unsure.

To understand more about how economic pressures influence acquisitions behavior, we asked whether revenue was used as an assessment factor. For 47% of respondents, this was true. This was more so for Group 4 presses, where 63% of editors were assessed on the basis of revenue, compared to 26% of Group 1 presses. For 42% of respondents the performance measures had changed at their press in the last decade. Sixty-seven percent had goals that were more revenue focused, including a greater stress on acquiring higher revenue works such as textbooks and trade titles. There are varying factors involved in how these assessment criteria are set. We included a free-text box for respondents to explain how assessment had changed. Many spoke about an increase in revenue as a focus, or that they are *"asked to balance their acquisitions between scholarly impact and sales impact."* On the other hand, there are also justifications to shift focus away from sales numbers: *"Dollar targets are less important because the*

income stream has become so irregular and hard to track. With plummeting sales numbers for most books and no good way to assign subrights income to books or editors, the dollars amounts are less important to individual evaluation" (Group 3).

Despite the continued concern with contract signings and revenue, editors must still preserve the reputation of the press through the quality of the output. Where the total proposal rejection rate across all presses was 64%, 47% of editors responded that the primary reason for rejecting a proposal is the quality, 39% because the proposal was out of scope. Editors are also constantly assessing the state of their fields, expanding into new areas by *"identifying trends in academia"* (27%) or identifying *"market potential"* and *"availability of subventions"* (20%). As one Group 1 editor wrote: *"It's more art than science,"* broadly supporting the notion that the complex understanding an editor has of a field plays a crucial role. The leading factor in launching a new book series, for instance, was that the topic was *"an emerging subject area"* (69%). On the other hand, revenue returns as a major factor when book series are closed with *"poor sales"* identified by 51% of respondents. The second most important factor was that the *"subfield is no longer intellectually vibrant"* (26%). These factors work alongside each other. As one Group 1 editor wrote: *"I look for shrinking numbers of university departments nationally, and other signals . . . that the list isn't adding prestige or revenue. It's got to be one if not both."*

On the quantitative side, we analyzed the sales and acquisition title count data we received from five presses across 16 subject areas. We performed a correlation analysis to determine whether there is a relationship between annual revenue and the titles acquired that year. We did the analysis on the overall dataset, as well as by subject. As we only had a limited dataset, we were using this to view general patterns and inform further study, rather than to come to definitive conclusions about this relationship. Is there a correlation between the revenue from a specific subject in a given year and the number of new titles acquired in that subject in the same year? Yes, we found that there was; however, the strength of these correlations varies greatly by publisher and subject area. Statistically speaking, the subject-specific correlations, strong or slight, were positive. As revenue went up, so did the title count acquired. The strongest correlation is seen in Linguistics and Theology. The weakest is in Jewish Studies and Urban Studies. One major question that arises then is: is

revenue driving acquisitions or is content published driving revenue?

What did we learn from this pilot study as we move on to further study at this intersection? Accurate, consistent, comparable data is hard to obtain across multiple publishers. In gathering this quantitative data in further study, we will need to have the count of titles by acquisition date, as contract-to-publish times differ across subjects and may skew the results. We also need to reconsider how we are selecting subjects. We need to be consistent with the granularity across subject areas. We also learned, like others before us (Esposito & Barch, 2017, p. 11), that monograph-specific data is not easy to collect.

Conclusion

While the findings of our research are preliminary, we can identify some trends from our initial work. There are certainly many questions that have arisen. In the survey results, we saw mixed messages about the importance of revenue to acquisitions. On one hand, the majority of editors reported an increase in revenue as a means of annual assessment. On the other, editors, in the words of one respondent, find a way to “support the continuation of important scholarly research,” regardless of these economic pressures. The mission is ultimately of most importance. It became clear that cooperation and collaboration are key to sustainability: monographs do not exist on their own in the market, and neither do university presses. Editors are working interdisciplinarily and are supporting their monograph program through

increases in more high-revenue products, whether textbooks or trade titles.

More than anything, we realized that deeper examination is necessary. To expand on our preliminary findings, we will need more title and revenue data across a longer time frame from a larger number of presses. To understand the complexity of the work editors do in sustaining scholarly monograph publishing, we will also need to do more qualitative research: interviews with editors, as well as discussions with librarians and faculty will provide a more detailed picture. There are relationships we were not able to explore more fully; for example, where and how do aggregators fit into the picture?

So, are economic pressures on university press acquisitions quietly changing the shape of the scholarly record? Acquisitions editors are still largely following an ethos of shepherding scholarly monographs through to publication, regardless of sales potential, but sustainability under current models is in question. New production and distribution methods, such as print-on-demand, still seem underutilized. While new models for supporting monograph publishing are emerging, such as funded open access, these models have yet to fully take hold and still leave many questions. How, for instance, will open access models support monographs that are more costly to produce? Further study, from both a qualitative and quantitative approach, will help to answer the question of how acquisitions editors are shaping the future of the scholarly monograph.

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