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Going It Alone: Why University Presses Are Creating Their Own E-Book Collections

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Abstract

Most university presses deliver their e-books to libraries through aggregators. However, in 2019, two university presses, the MIT Press and University of Michigan Press, will launch their own e-book offerings for direct sale to institutions, and other presses are considering following suit. While there are a few university presses who have offered their own e-book products for a number of years, the intensity of discussion within the university press community about "going it alone" is new and deserves further interrogation. This paper summarizes why the MIT Press and University of Michigan Press are taking the bold step of launching their own e-book collections.

Introduction

In 2019, the MIT Press and University of Michigan Press will launch their own e-book offerings for direct sale to institutions. University presses selling content directly to libraries is not a new idea. Most university presses deliver their e-books to libraries through aggregators such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, EBSCO, and ProQuest. However, Oxford, Cambridge, and Duke University Presses have been providing their own e-book collections, and Harvard University Press has been offering their specialist collection, Loeb Online Library, for some time now. It is of little surprise that larger university presses with high levels of support staff such as Oxford and Cambridge undertook direct distribution of content in the marketplace. However, smaller university presses also began to envision new potential to engage directly with libraries in 2008 when Duke University Press entered the marketplace as a direct-to-library distributor. Steve Cohn, director of Duke University Press, has been dubbed by the university press community the "Prince of Going It Alone" due to this bold move now a decade ago. That said, no other university presses have followed suit until now.

The MIT Press Experience

The MIT Press, one of the largest university presses in the United States, publishes over 200 new books each year along with 30 journals in the arts and humanities, economics, international affairs, history, political science, science and technology, and more. It is a relatively young press, only having been established in 1962.

In recent years, MIT Press has recognized that libraries have shifted their priorities in collection development, and thereby shifted their purchasing behavior. In response, MIT Press has shifted their strategy for engaging with libraries with the decision to digitize, control, and preserve their own book content through their new MIT Press Direct program. Having direct control over their platform and content also increases opportunities to experiment with new functionality, content types, and configurable access models, so they can provide terms of access that are consistent with their values as a university press. This freedom to experiment includes developing environments for the delivery and enhancement of open access monographs.

Going it alone allows MIT Press to have better access to data. By not having to navigate through intermediaries, they can collect usage data to better their publishing program as a whole. They can also establish direct institutional relationships with libraries so they can better align with the collection needs of libraries. By consolidating all of their assets within one environment through hosting and distributing their own e-book collection, MIT Press hopes to retain better control over their assets; develop stronger, more meaningful relationships with libraries; and improve their services and the MIT Press brand overall.

The University of Michigan Press Experience

The motivation behind the University of Michigan Press's move in creating its own hosted e-book collection is a somewhat similar story. They too have a very

strong desire to reconnect with their partners, namely libraries. However, University of Michigan Press also had a strong desire to innovate in order to support digital enrichment, as well as invest in and sustain open source, community-accountable approaches.

The University of Michigan Press, part of the University of Michigan Library, was founded in 1930. The press publishes around 100 books a year in political science, performing arts, classics, American Studies, and Asian Studies. Like other university presses, University of Michigan Press has historically distributed their e-books only through aggregators at varying levels of DRM, creating a tangle of opaque business models, restrictive access rules, and inconsistent user experiences. With too many intermediaries in the supply chain, it was challenging to collect information from customers and readers that informed the press on how to improve their services. The rigid aggregator platforms also restricted innovation in transforming digital books beyond flat, print facsimiles to include "digital affordances" as authors and readers were demanding. In response to this demand, the press utilized initial funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to develop Fulcrum, a community-based, open source publishing platform that facilitates integration of digital affordances with the long-form narratives that reference them. The development of this platform led to the natural next step for University of Michigan Press to use the Fulcrum platform as the home for their own e-books.

The University of Michigan Press, as a part of the University of Michigan Library, is library values–based and they wanted to create an e-book collection that epitomized these values from end to end. By going it alone, they have the freedom to engage with libraries in a new way. The press engineered their business model in such a way that by investing in the content from a nonprofit publisher, libraries are also investing in the growth of a sustainable, open source, infrastructure community. They are currently the only nonprofit, community-governed, e-book platform. The University of Michigan Press e-book collection is from the library, for the library. Going it alone was the only way they could make this paradigm shift happen.

Conclusion

The idea of "going it alone" is growing among the university press community. Ironically, "going it alone" is not a solitary act. The decision to work directly with the library community is a result of the commitment to increase engagement with the university presses' entire community, especially the libraries, in order to further their mission to advance knowledge and contribute to the global scholarly establishment of which libraries are key stakeholders. The university presses want to shift their relationships with libraries from merely transactional to intentionally engaged and participatory.

University presses also desire to position themselves as leaders in the scholarly ecosystem. They want to better accommodate their stakeholders as the scholarly economy constantly shifts due to changing budgets, transformational funding policies, and new technological innovations. Amy Brand, director of MIT Press, noted:

> While I feel strongly that our academic institutions should champion and protect their presses, I feel even more strongly that university presses as a group could be doing a better job of controlling the narrative around what we do, how we differ in our motives and values from commercial publishers, who are beholden to shareholders, and how we align with our host institutions. (2018, p. 309)

How many more university presses will act on this idea remains to be seen. The potential for disruption and innovation is high, and it would behoove the university press community to watch these pioneers who were inspired to model the path that Duke University Press took so many years ago. These university presses are developing processes and infrastructure to facilitate engagement. They are also participating in and even leading technological shifts. Finally, they are establishing transparent communication practices and policies internally and externally across diverse groups with intentions of building a stronger sense of community among all of their stakeholders and partners.

References

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