

## EDITORIAL

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# The University Press Redux: Introduction

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*There is no such thing as a typical university press*

Arising from the University Press Redux Conference held in Liverpool in March 2016, which welcomed presses large, small, commercial, open access, library-based, UK, US, and European, and heard the views of authors, funders, students, librarians, and some of the most dynamic figures in university press publishing, the collection of articles that make up this special issue of *Learned Publishing* tells us two things we perhaps need never have doubted: first that there is a community of university-based publishers out there who continue to privilege the mission of scholarly dissemination in the face of an evolving and often challenging marketplace, and second that despite this common thread there is no such thing as a typical university press.

Nevertheless, Ithaka's Roger Schonfield has helpfully endeavoured to establish a taxonomy of university presses in a recent blog post [www.sr.ithaka.org/blog/a-taxonomy-of-university-presses-today/](http://www.sr.ithaka.org/blog/a-taxonomy-of-university-presses-today/). For Schonfield, presses are best characterized as 'global presses' (Oxbridge), 'traditional success stories' (typically based at wealthy Ivy League institutions), 'innovators' (often helmed by directors drawn from commercial academic publishing, and are keen to evolve the industry), 'integrated presses' (those merged with libraries), 'new entrants' (self-styled disrupters, whose long-term viability is still unknown), and 'the pressured middle' (Schonfield's term for the majority of US presses, subsidized but squeezed by diminished demand for the monograph and a reduction in funding). These categories are used to describe US presses specifically, and of course they are imperfect as any attempt to categorize such a diverse group must be. However, expanding consideration of the university press further to a global context and, with the caveat that this too requires a little generalization, some striking regional differences are apparent.

All presses in the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia, among other countries, enjoy the good fortune of operating and

publishing in English, the global lingua franca of scholarly communication since World War II. But, as Margo Bargheer outlines in her article, as recently as the 1920s, German was the most published language of scholarly communication. The dispersal, and in some cases elimination, of German scholars by the Nazis and national restructuring after WWII ended that domination, and now German university presses, like those working in other continental European languages, today find themselves operating in markets limited to a large extent by linguistic borders. Linguistically limited demand combined with the never-ending supply that comes from a tradition of doctoral thesis publication as *sine qua non* for academic status, has created a fertile ground for open access university presses in mainland Europe. New open access Anglophone presses will be enlightened by Bargheer's summary of long-standing open access publication by university presses.

The United Kingdom is the birthplace of the university press, with the venerable Cambridge University Press, established in 1534, here represented by Mandy Hill. Longevity alone does not account for the enduring market muscle of Cambridge University Press and its fellow 'global press' at Oxford. Both have benefited from a host of other factors including the high status of their host institutions, the historical and geographical benefits of the former British Empire and its aftermath, a diversification of publishing through both shrewd editorial judgement and the luck of being a prominent publisher at a key moment of knowledge or product evolution (e.g. The Philological Society's endeavours that formed the Oxford English Dictionary and ensuing Oxford reference list). The UK does not have the widespread tradition of major philanthropy in higher education that is more common in the USA and the majority of its established presses operate without significant subsidy. To square this circle, UK university presses enjoy the geographical advantage of residence in a small country with a

strong commercial publishing infrastructure. It is possible to arrive at the offices of a commercial scholarly publisher within a couple of hours drive from almost anywhere in mainland Britain, which brings with it easy access to experienced publishing professionals and a porous network of knowledge that saw, for instance, UK university presses follow commercial academic publishers into journal publishing, while a majority of their US counterparts remained focused solely on books. All of this arguably feeds into a more commercially oriented, but still mission-focused, set of established university presses in the UK.

As befits a large and diverse country, the shape and size of university presses in the USA varies enormously. Schonfield's 'traditional success stories' benefit from high status host institutions and endowments that have enabled both greater risk taking and the retail of books at a relatively low price point, even as demand has narrowed. The withdrawal of subsidies as part of wider higher education budget cuts and a reduction in demand for certain kinds of publication have helped to generate the 'pressured middle' but also the 'innovators', represented in this issue by Alison Mudditt and the 'integrated presses', explored here by Charles Watkinson. It goes without saying that many US presses (often those with journals or distinctive niches, such as Georgetown Languages) can claim to thrive outside 'the pressured middle' or any other category and that pockets of innovation sit in all categories.

The sheer size of the USA enables university presses to diversify without diluting quality. Regional markets can be large enough, and diverse enough, to sustain vibrant publishing programmes that may focus on locality as well as scholarly disciplines. The scale of the US university press community has enabled the creation of a distinct trade body, the Association of American University Presses. A facilitator of knowledge sharing across presses and a common protector of the 'pressured middle', its scale and budget became possible first in the largest global market for university press books. North America remains the richest and most developed university press ecosystem and a hub for debates about the present and future of the university presses.

Our conference did not, alas, benefit from the attendance of university press colleagues from several continents, yet these may well be the territories for university press watchers to focus on in future. As the process of 'decolonising curricula' continues in Africa and funding bodies such as the Open Society Foundation expand support to digital development in

the Global South, there is an opportunity for African university presses to take ownership of publishing that has often been handled by European publishers. In Latin America, meanwhile, linguistic commonality and geographical proximity have combined to create a thriving network of university presses, evidenced by the fact that the recently commenced annual International Convention of University Presses at the Frankfurt Book Fair is an initiative of the Latin American presses. Geographically isolated, and with a relatively small number of universities across a vast continent, Australia joins continental Europe as a potential case study of developed open access, with its geography much suited to the immediacy of toll-free digital access rather than conventional print distribution. The success of the 2015 Reinventing University Publishing Conference marks Australia out as a country for Anglo-American university presses to watch.

This is not an attempt to catalogue the world's different university press traditions, which would be impossible in the confines of a brief introduction and necessarily very far from complete, but one of Schonfield's press types can be found in all countries, that of the 'new entrant'. Befitting a journal issue associated with the AHRC/British Library Academic Book of the Future project, Andrew Lockett and Lara Speicher explore the role and timeliness of the new university press, while Professor Sarah Kember's tour-de-force signals that innovation in scholarly publishing should by no means be limited to open access.

As Mark Llewellyn's rich analysis showcases the enduring importance of university presses to the humanities and social sciences, and Steven Hill's insight from the world of research policy throws down the gauntlet to demand that the relevance of university presses continues, it is perhaps fitting to give the final word to Alison Shaw, whose case study documents the first 20 years of Policy Press. Her title will be recognized by every university press director no matter what the category or country: we all need Vision, Mission, Passion, and Luck.

## Note

Presentations from the University Press Redux Conference, hosted by Liverpool University Press in association with the AHRC/British Library Academic Book of the Future Project are available here: <http://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/pages/university-press-redux-slides>