

## Council of Graduate Schools Dissertation Workshop

Preliminary statement from:

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### **Background on Distressed Funding Models:**

University presses (UPs) play critical roles in the advancement, preservation, and dissemination of scholarship, while indirectly participating in the credentialing of faculty. The primary method presses use to execute these missions is the publication of humanities monographs and journals. By charging end-users for access, UPs have conventionally funded most of the costs associated with these activities but full cost-recovery has required additional subventions of presses by their host institutions.

However, the combination of the prolonged economic downturn with the development of alternative digital models of dissemination is putting unprecedented stress on the traditional financial model of publishing monographs. In a bygone era when institutional libraries and individual scholars had both the funds and the inclination to build large physical collections of scholarship, a marketplace existed that was substantial enough to allow presses to charge end users for access. This marketplace also allowed presses to acquire books in categories where cost-recovery was less lucrative, taking advantage of risk pool publishing, whereby sales of books in some disciplines offset those in others.

Numerous indicators suggest unequivocally that we no longer live in such a time. This is resulting in short term effects like increased price points, the growth in market-based factors driving acquisitions decisions, and a reduction in marketing resources to support dissemination. It is against these trends that we must begin to imagine what the future landscape of scholarly publishing might look like.

### **An inefficient workflow model at university presses:**

The publishing industry—like newspapers and music but unlike, say, film—both produces and disseminates its content. Publishers have highly experienced content acquisition and curation teams, and even larger production and dissemination teams. Content acquisition and curation (and some publicity and marketing functions) remain activities that have resisted scale. Despite all the changes in our industry and the efforts of large media conglomerates to scale and automate publishing, this part of the business remains and indeed thrives in organizations that permit a creative, bespoke group of imaginative teams to develop content.

However, with the introduction of digital workflows and production tools, the benefits of scale are being realized in these latter, back-end activities of production and dissemination. This is one of the explanations for the acceleration in mergers and acquisitions in the publishing industry. Scale has always mattered, but now it matters more than ever.

In commercial scholarly publishing, the benefits of scale have led to larger and larger lists of monographs and windfall profits for large commercial firms. But most university presses, for a

host of reasons (governance, structural, financial), are not able to take advantage of this trend. It is not difficult to imagine a future landscape where either only the largest scholarly publishers survive, or the set of activities a university press executes is much more limited to list development and editorial work (presumably the activities most valued in the credentialing process).

### **Pressure on Press Subsidies**

In an environment where costs associated with the system of higher education are under greater scrutiny, subsidies toward UPs and humanities publishing are witnessing a steady decline. These subsidies fund the incremental editorial work of filtering, developmental editing, and copyediting, which the marketplace simply cannot support. There is not a consistent return-on-investment for these activities, but they are critical for transforming dissertations into enduring works of scholarship.

### **Open Access as a solution:**

In response to the prevailing economic trends, university presses have frequently reacted by reducing the number of first-book monographs they publish, and increasing the price points and restrictive barriers to their availability. Despite the growth of digital dissemination pathways, UPs are effectively reducing access.

Open access (OA) is widely hailed as a solution to the announced crisis in scholarly publishing. Indeed, in the journals world, OA is becoming a practical option in many fields, including some humanities disciplines. But there has been significantly less attention paid to the prospect of OA for humanities monographs. This is due to the distinct challenges with monograph publishing—the higher investments in time and money to prepare them for publication; the slow migration of formats from analog to digital; the lack of publishing funds from grant makers; and the deeply entrenched economic models at the primary publishers of monograph—university presses.

The future of UPs is likely to be tied to a new approach toward funding the publication of humanities monographs, paired with a more efficient, digital-first dissemination model. This will require a scholarly communications ecosystem that is prepared to embrace and utilize digital formats.

There are some potential moral hazards to be cognizant of when considering a new funding model. One of the strengths of the cost-recovery model UPs currently use is that we do not concern ourselves about the publication funding potential of individual scholars. While we certainly consider the marketplace in our acquisitions decisions, this is arguably a proxy for public engagement. In a scenario where a publisher is made financially whole when a manuscript arrives, our incentives to edit, market, and disseminate are significantly eroded. A publisher might easily increase its output, reduce its quality, and improve its margins. This would raise new challenges in the credentialing system for promotion and tenure committees. Or in another scenario where some scholars are at institutions famous for offering publications subsidies, it's not hard to imagine a gap growing between wealthier institutions and everyone else.

Which is all to say that while a “flipped” model of funding humanities publications would be superior to the cost-recovery one, it is not a silver bullet and it would need to be developed with concerns like this in mind.

**The durability of the monograph:**

The future landscape and potential solutions described above presume the enduring integrity of the monograph as both a measure of scholarly achievement as well as a format for presenting and preserving scholarship. It is probably not up to UPs to fairly assess whether this will, in fact, be our future. We try to recall Clay Shirky’s aphorism that “Institutions will try to preserve the problems to which they are the solution.” This is simply a 21<sup>st</sup>-century pivot from Upton Sinclair’s comment that “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”

In addition to the potential cost savings of a digital-first model for monograph publishing, the monograph itself may require a digital hosting platform. The growth of digital scholarship in the humanities creates the potential obsolescence—or at least a step off the pedestal—of the physical book as dominant transmission format.

But while that part of our future awaits clarity, the current economic and market trends are very clearly indicating that the current system of funding monograph publications will not be sustainable in the future. It arguably isn’t sustainable today, and it will never get better...only more challenging.