University Presses and Libraries*

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This study examined segments of the difficult situation currently facing university presses. Shrinking library orders, print runs, and university subsidies have led the presses to develop various strategies to recover costs. The cutbacks in traditional monographs and the lure of the cross-over book have constituted a prevalent list-building strategy, with mixed consequences for art history. We are impressed by the work of the university press art history editors, their genuine commitment to scholarship, acquiring of high-quality and innovative work, and the finely produced books that they publish. But while their imprimatur confers enormous prestige, the presses operate in an increasingly circumscribed field, and surveying that field raises a question about mission. The mission of the university presses and how they relate to their universities is unclear and in need of rethinking.

In his famous article "Marketing Myopia," Theodore Levitt, the late Harvard Business School professor, described industries that are "endangering their futures by improperly describing their purposes." Hollywood, for example, failed to see television as a threat because it saw its product as movies, not entertainment. "There is no such thing as a growth industry...;," Levitt wrote, "only companies organized and operated to capitalize on growth opportunities."[1] His insight pertains to university presses, which have primarily defined their business as book publishing, not knowledge transmission, and partially as a result have been relatively slow to participate in online publishing. Some presses have launched successful online journal programs, but born-digital ventures are still rare, and art history is probably the least likely point of entry. No one press can solve the image problem or create a market for e-books. These changes require larger scale, collective action.

Libraries, by contrast, define their mission in terms of the dissemination of information, and they have become innovative leaders in the electronic domain. Loyalty to beautifully produced books is a wonderful thing, but it appears to have kept presses from capitalizing on a growth opportunity. If university presses redefine their business in terms of the transmission of knowledge rather than strictly the publishing of books, common ground opens up with their university libraries, and productive collaborations between libraries and university presses, now nascent, will grow. Forward-thinking leaders in several presses and libraries are working together, fashioning new relationships, and pursing new directions, but more could be done. The presses lack the resources to launch full-fledged electronic publications, but such infrastructural capacity already exists in the library system. In collaboration, university presses and libraries could have a very positive impact on scholarly publication, but this suggestion begs the question of the puzzling relationship of universities to the presses that bear their name.

University presses appear to be kept at a distance from their parent institutions. The press receives direct and indirect subsidy and obviously trades on the university's good name, yet the press is not integrated in the university system. One has to wonder what role university leaders think their presses should perform.

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[1] Theodore Levitt, "Marketing Myopia," *Harvard Business Review* 38 no. 4 (July-August 1960), 46, 47.

The strengths of the presses are usually not coordinated with the university's academic strengths, nor are publishing initiatives aligned with institutional objectives. Would it not be more productive for the university, the faculty, and the press if they collaborated, and if at least some editorial policies reinforced common intellectual priorities and supported faculty research? Such collaborative thinking need not hamper the vital role university presses play in publishing stimulating new scholarship independent of institutional affiliations; it would be geared instead to enhancing and clarifying university press missions in specific instances. Why should universities alienate their presses when they could play a role in advancing the institutional mission? That is a question for university leaders to answer.