Forum on Academic Publishing in the Humanities
Panel II: Publishing Crisis, Institutional Perspectives
Roundtable Discussion
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I'd like to make just a few points in response to these papers, from my perspective inside a University Press struggling to find its place in a changing world of scholarly publishing. Since historically at Cornell our bread & butter has been the monograph, I have the most to say about Joe's paper, but, contemplating the future, I have a few thoughts as well about Don's paper.

So, first:

1) It's instructive to see the degree to which the word "crisis" has been a part of the vocabulary around university presses since at least the 1950s. I agree that the word is probably overused and exaggerates the degree to which our current situation is really new or unique.

On the other hand, I think there is one important difference that distinguishes our current situation:

- For the first time, print has become—at least potentially—expendable.
- In all of the previous reports Joe refers to, there is a basic assumption that one way or another print publication is the end result of the scholarly publishing process.
- But now that libraries are no longer the reliable purchasers of monographs they once were, the whole system really is shifting (being "destabilized" as Joe might say) in a way we haven't seen before. Libraries in fact propped up the system of scholarly publishing for years, and without them we are forced to rely increasingly on individual book buyers.
- But as Joe shows in his paper, even in the best of days, when libraries were buying lots of books, university presses were not self-supporting. They needed title subsidies as well as general operating support from their universities.
- In our current situation, though, the numbers are dire. Printruns of 700-800 are common—and often that's too high for the demand. Many books sell fewer than 500 copies, and the libraries account for 200, maybe even fewer.
- In such a situation, it's no wonder we're talking about electronic publication. All of that effort and attention poured into a book that ends up selling only 300 copies. Of course, e-books make a lot of sense.
- Unfortunately, however, there's still no business model for e-books. Gutenberg-e was a great idea. A serious attempt to shift academic book publishing to the electronic environment. But it proved impossible to sustain. According to the 2007 Mellon Annual report:
  - "A major issue is that the Gutenberg-e books have been all but overlooked in the review pages of the relevant general and specialized journals. The

absence of reviews for distinguished, prize-winning books is a critical problem, not only for the scholars themselves, but also for scholarship generally. It is indicative of the transitional state of monographic publishing that review editors who responded to a survey by one of the Gutenberg-e authors were almost unanimous in their request for a printed version of the e-books to distribute for review."

- In short, although university press publishing has always been a challenge, I do think there's something unique and particular to the current problems we face. Whether we call it a crisis or not, I don't believe that most presses can continue along the same path and expect to survive.

2) The second point I'd like to make is that, despite everything I've just said, in many ways the day-to-day life of the majority of university press publishers hasn't changed all that much. We're still caught up in the mundane world of publishing books.

- Publishers are still competing with each other for narrow monographs, many of them first books by junior professors
- And there's no shortage of scholars, young and old, producing new book-length monographs. They may have a notion that not as many of these books are getting published. They may know that there are fewer presses vying for their books than in the past. They certainly know that publishers are charging more for their books. Some may have even been turned down by a publisher because their book is "too narrow" or there's not a "large enough market."
- Yet, most I suspect still think they can find a publisher—even if they have to work a little harder—and many will end up finding a publisher.

Meanwhile, within university presses, we're doing everything we can to keep the system going:

- It is harder and harder to reach our overall sales goals. With declining sales per title, we have to publish more books to generate as much income as we did 5 years ago.
- Editors spend more and more of their time securing subsidies. Not a bad thing in principle, but we're chasing after $500 here, $1000 there—from departments, scholarly organizations, and foundations
- Consequently, there's much more of a focus on cutting costs in the editorial/production process—standard designs, less intensive editing, no proofreading, eliminating paper and mailing costs throughout the ms and proof stages
- More and more POD—Searching the backlist for books to bring back into print; reprinting books as POD rather than offset.
- In fact, one of the underappreciated effects of the new technology is not that we've done away with the printed book—it's that we've made the book more affordable to print.

There are some efforts at e-publishing.

- Mostly at this point, though, we're experimenting around the edges—participating in such ventures as Ebrary, NetLibrary, Kindle.
- And Don has mentioned some more ambitious projects at a few presses, supported by external funding.
- Still, there's not a lot of sustained e-publishing efforts generated within presses.

3) So where do we go from here?

- Cooperation among presses is one possible solution. Mellon Foundation support for collaboration among presses publishing first books in specific subject areas—Slavic Studies, American Literatures, South Asian Studies, and Ethnomusicology—is encouraging. The American Literatures initiative includes NYU, Fordham, Rutgers, Temple, and Virginia. According to the announcement, a "shared, centralized, external editorial service will be created to handle all editorial and production aspects of books published by the initiative." I hope this works but I'm not sure it is sustainable—in which case I'm not sure where it gets us.
- Gutenberg-e was a great idea. But, as I just noted, it was financially and practically unsustainable.
- One option is to pursue more streamlined electronic monograph publishing projects such as those at California, Penn State, and now at Cornell (which Peter Hohendahl will mention)
- If the monograph is here to stay, which at least for the near term seems to be the case, we need to find ways to make electronic publication viable, building on the kind of subscription model that libraries and publishers use for journals, but with print-on-demand as a ready and immediate option for individual buyers.

Beyond this, though, university presses have to come to terms with their place in an evolving world.

- Peter Brantley says that university presses need to go local. Tie ourselves to our local communities and regions. Or become more of an essential player within our parent institutions. I think this is right.
- Some presses may find that going local in one's region will work—e.g. UNC building on its traditional strengths publishing on NC and the South or New Mexico on the Southwest.
- Others, I think, must do this by pursuing partnerships inside their institutions. Joe is right, unfortunately, about presses' "increasing estrangement" from the universities that called them into being. But I love what Joe says about presses and their parent universities capitalizing on the "ties and obligations" we have to one another. We need to become part of a larger effort to coordinate all publishing operations within our universities—the move toward what the Ithaka Report calls "university publishing." This will inevitably involve expanding into areas outside of the humanities where we may not have traditional strengths—e.g. the sciences, the business school, the hotel school.

- It also means more collaboration with our libraries and more collaboration with our own faculties. And here is where I see the most promise for the kind of publishing opportunities that Don describes growing out of archives, special collections, and scholarly editions. We certainly have precedents to build on with the success, for example, of the Cornell Wordsworth and Cornell Yeats.

And, perhaps ironically, this would take us back to our traditional roots as university presses—not as service units but as integral parts of the academic enterprise.