

1-2015

# A Library Publishing Manifesto

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Royster, Paul, "A Library Publishing Manifesto" (2015). *Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries*. Paper 321.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/321>

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# A Library Publishing Manifesto

by **Paul Royster** (Coordinator of Scholarly Communications, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries)

*“Use every man after his desert, and who should ‘scape whipping?”* — Hamlet II. ii.

## The Sins of the Publishers

Modern publishers have worked their way around to a business model that is ultimately based on preventing readers from reaching or using what they publish. Corporate publishers seek to “corner the market” on academic intellectual property and have put themselves in position to exact a toll from its every exposure or use. Digital technology has whetted their appetites for ever tighter controls, for rights management that persists beyond sale, dictating the terms of access for even the most far-flung user. Publishers are now quietly withholding a growing range of rights from purchasers, obviously in anticipation of assessing further levies against any downstream usage.

These publishers have the power to control and commercialize the intellectual output of the academic and scientific community, even those portions deriving directly from public funding. Their latest point of interest seems to be how much control over this content can be held back from the contracted delivery — what rights or licenses to re-use, repurpose, analyze, or compile can be reserved by the “seller”? The day seems not far off when they will deliver only temporary and “arms-length” possession of the text, and additional fees will apply if one seeks to “read,” “understand,” or “act upon” its content. (I write this in the wake of the STM publishers’ proposed menu of open-access licenses — slicing the rights “wafer-thin” to exact more revenue over the life-course of an article.)

But the catalog of sins does not stop there. Some publishers are also willing to claim rights they do not legally hold, discourage or contest the legitimate “fair use” of materials, collect fees for items they do not own, and assert their rights at the expense of the author’s interests. As an industry, they have used the courts to oppose indexing of works for Internet search, litigated distribution of educational materials by universities, and contested access to public-funded research products. I understand that all publishers are not **Microsoft**, or **Disney**, or the **Motion Picture Association of America** — but those are the type specimens. They set the standard for excessive greed and desire to exert maximum control over their captive audience. The desire for success or the need for survival drives the rest of the industry to emulate their practices insofar as they are able and confident they can get away with it.

As a former laborer in that industry, I have spent the past ten years trying to explain to librarians the reasons and motives of publisher behavior. Following are some things that publishers believe, and would like the rest of us to believe as well.

**The present system is working just fine.** It is hard to dispute this from the publishers’ point of view. For example, in 2012, **Reed**

**Elsevier** had revenues of \$8.3 billion — the same figure coincidentally as the state government of Nebraska — and they turned a nearly 40% profit on that figure. They get the content for free, or nearly so; their customer base is locked in, with limited alternatives; and their largest challenge is developing more efficient means of extracting money from the universities.

**The greatest threat is interference from government.** Now, it is okay for governments to pay for research efforts, including even direct funding of publication fees; that’s not seen as interference. And extending copyright an additional 20 years — that wasn’t interference either. But apart from paying the publishers and protecting their franchises, government needs to stay out of publishing — or so they believe.

**There is nothing unusual about turning over into private hands the ownership and rights to monetize the intellectual property resulting from millions of dollars in federally-funded research.** We’re really just performing a service for the common good. The fact that we end up owning it all is immaterial and almost accidental. Really, this stuff happens all the time; nothing to see here; move along, please.

**Publishing is more valuable than scientific discovery.** And strangely, it is not the actual production of the publication — the editing, design, typesetting, printing, or coding — that confers this value. It is rather the act of selling itself that makes the published “article” valuable. This is ultimately the function that the publishers serve — they determine the commercial value of research by charging the academy for access.

The universities have delivered a captive labor force into the publishers’ hands, and they can hardly be blamed for taking advantage. The requirements for tenure continue to generate content with minimal recruitment expense or additional incentives being contributed from the publishers’ side. Indeed, if tenure were not at stake, what would happen to scholarly publishing? It would certainly not cease to exist, but it would be conducted on a different scale and in an altogether different manner. Publishers are not currently serving the communications needs of the faculty, library, and university; they are serving their own needs — for survival, for profit, and for future security.

## The Challenges of the University Presses

The university presses (and the publishing arms of various scientific societies) may be several degrees less culpable than the blatantly profit-driven commercial publishers, but they sometimes seem to operate from the same

premises. If “less sinful” is a compliment, they should own it proudly. Their economic needs and their organizational inertia for self-preservation lead them to pursue their own interests as publishers, and this condition colors every action and publishing decision they take. University presses cannot be expected to commit corporate suicide; but they will need to develop new modes of coexistence in a digital environment that has evolved much faster than they ever could have prepared for.

This past summer one university press discovered that a perennial backlist bestseller (*No-no Boy* by **John Okada**) had been issued in a pirated eBook edition by an enterprising (though legally naïve) high school student from Pennsylvania and was being offered for sale on **Amazon**. The press had been the book’s publisher for more than 30 years, but the student had scooped them with an eBook edition that offered digital availability, lower price, and a more attractive cover. The pirated edition was quickly and apologetically withdrawn by the student, with much grumbling from the presses about **Amazon’s** role in enabling it, but the lesson to be drawn is that publishers cannot just sit on their assets and expect the world to come to their terms. Their publishing “expertise” needs to be continually applied and updated if they are to justify their continued stewardship of important cultural resources.

The university presses have had the best content; but they have been shy about exposing too much — protecting their content’s digital virginity — as if it lost rather than gained value with use and familiarity. As one executive put it recently, in answer to a request for permission to archive a chapter by two faculty members at this institution, one previously excerpted and licensed to an academic magazine: “The [name withheld] University Press does not publish open-access online materials and respectfully declines to authorize open-access online distribution of our contracted, copyrighted content.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself. And they have a perfect right to do so. As we say in cattle country — “it’s your cow.” But it perfectly illustrates why there needs to be library publishing.

In my view, there are five things about publishing that need to change.

- 1. Requiring the surrender of intellectual property.** There is no need for publishers to own the content for 95 years in order to issue a printed or digital version. All the reasons put forward for this — “to ensure maximum distribution,” “required by our charter,” “to protect your contribution,” “necessary to support our mix of business models” — are, to put it nicely, poppycock. All that is required is a simple “permission to publish” or perhaps a right of first publication. Anything more

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represents the appropriation of the author's brainchild into a one-side contract of indentured servitude. We see many authors' products locked away from use and access because surplus copies remain languishing unsold in warehouses.

**2. The high rates of rejection.** Acceptance rates (or, more accurately, rejection rates) are seen as a measure of content quality, but they more properly reflect the degree to which publishers are failing to service the needs of the academy. If a work fails to meet the expectations of peer reviewers who may or may not have been selected appropriately, it is shunted on down the line, postponed, sent packing, to seek an outlet elsewhere, in a repeat of the lottery-like process. Even works with generally positive reviews can be rejected, based on the limited number of slots available. If only one in five submissions gets published, what happens to the other four? Do they not see the light of day because two readers did not get the point? I suppose we can always hope that the peer review system will improve — and that egotism, jealousy, lassitude, ignorance, and bile will forever disappear from the earth. But for many academic presses publishing more works would mean losing more money, so that is not a feasible option.

**3. The slow process, long schedules.** "Congratulations, your book/article has been accepted ... It is scheduled for publication in the spring season/issue three years hence." In fact, the long, long lead times are due largely to selling timetables based on seasonal catalogues and requiring six to ten months advance information for booksellers and distributors. Of course, the need to ensure the perfection of the copies placed in inventory plays a large role as well. Meticulous editing and proofing is needed, lest the publisher be stuck forever with typographically inaccurate copies.

**4. High prices.** Book prices are a product of three factors:

1. the cost of labor involved in selecting (rejecting), vetting, and perfecting the works;
2. the antiquated bookselling chain that grants large discounts to wholesalers and retailers who take the lion's share of the purchase price; and
3. the smallness of the market over which the fixed costs can be spread. This vicious cycle has led to concen-

tration on the subscription market, where a near-captive audience has little choice but to pony up, while cancelling the discretionary items.

**5. Limited distribution.** Only those individuals or institutions willing to pay the high prices will be able to read, evaluate, and digest the scholarship. Authors, having surrendered their rights to the content, are helpless to effect wider and lower-cost online dissemination.

The frontiers of scholarly communications are receding from the monograph and journal programs hosted by the scholarly presses, although these were always already a fairly conservative and largely traditional effort. They mattered — and still do — because they controlled the pantheon of published authors. Books and articles served to establish ground and reputation, to mark acceptance of ideas more than the challenges or speculations. Certainly, disputes are carried on; and new areas, modes, and methods of research are described. Publication in a major journal or by a major press has been a sign one has "arrived" — which ordinarily boils down to "tenurable" — but the preliminary investigations, the question-framing, and the grounding discussions have all happened outside the scholarly publications process: in seminars, conferences, lectures series, and non-published forums. The "space" where scholarly communications happens is increasingly digital and informal, involving the availability of working papers, online groups, social media, etc. This Ur-activity is more likely to be preserved, disseminated, and utilized through library publishing than through the more formalized scholarly publications process.

### **The Virtues of the University Presses**

There are many things that the university presses can teach library publishers — although business models, author relations, content stewardship, and user accommodation might not be among them.

It may not be surprising that, having spent many years in design and production, I feel the most critical lessons the university presses have to offer library publishing involve production values and design sensibility. Even in digital form, a book is not just a collection of words and thoughts; the whole aspires to be more than the sum of its parts, and a book still needs to display its own identity and specialness — even as an electronic file. It is not necessary, or even desirable, to apply "house style" or make everything conform to a predetermined or traditional model. But what is needed — and what is most gratifying — is to help the work achieve its optimal realization — for appearance, for usefulness, and for packaging.

University press publishing demonstrates the value of the finished object: the stand-alone work, the complete package, the final product — not the open-ended, more-to-come, process-without-arrival, circuitous, serial, or synchronic collections of pieces served up via social media. This is not meant to diminish the importance of innovation in alternate modes of delivery; but (in my opinion) the "book,"

having survived past transitions over several millennia, will once again emerge as the most enduring, authoritative, and convenient form of written communication. Nobody this side of the NSA wants to see your collected 10 years of tweets and listserv postings. A single file-object, discrete and complete, is better suited for preservation and distribution. Moreover, a work that was completed, however imperfectly, ages better than one whose resolution was left unfinished, or unattempted altogether. Scholarly books and articles consciously speak to an audience outside of their contemporary time; they reflect the voices of past contributors and appeal to the judgment of an imagined "future history." They have a beginning and an end, and occupy a distinct place; each can be cited and retrieved and experienced in its entirety.

University presses also demonstrate the value of the uncluttered, unlayered, unlinked, and unembellished object. Library publishing needs to avoid the messiness of the supplementary file, so recently beloved by the commercial and society publishers. Web pages and groups of files are far more troublesome to store, transmit, and manipulate than the discrete file-object — the single article, monograph, or book review — complete in one file. (Although books can sometimes be split up into separate chapters — but not if all the notes are collected in the back.)

The university presses have developed and practiced presentation that is simple, authoritative, clean, and direct. Contrast their work with the journal pages produced by Elsevier or PNAS: 2-column, letter-sized pages in 8-point Lilliputian type, with tables, notes, and bibliographies in 6.5 point or smaller, sometimes in solid light blue, sometimes requiring as many as 20 "Supporting Information" files to complete, and sometimes hiding a minefield of links where the slightest mis-click sends a shaky-handed old man on a Nantucket sleighride across the (sponsored) Internet. Reading onscreen html is even worse; the content contends with extraneous promotional graphics and links that claim screen acreage, make for slow loading, and cause windows to flicker and flip.

Even in the scholarly electronic venues, good traditional design practice seems to be honored more in the breach than the observance. Ragged-right text measures exceeding 100 characters in warm gray sans serif fonts may be visually appealing (to some, perhaps), but are by no standard readable for any length of time.

### **The Campus Communications Nexus**

Library publishing exists to facilitate the production and dissemination of scholarship that does not fit the currently practiced publishing models. The United States has roughly 130 university presses and 2,870 four-year colleges and universities. Those numbers suggest the need for alternative outlets for faculty scholarship. Especially needed are outlets that do not commandeer perpetual ownership of the content in exchange for its publication. The potential universe of interesting and useful scholarly work far exceeds the capacity of the

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university presses and lies mostly outside the financially incentivized scope of the larger houses. Everything does not have to be a monograph or journal article. Library publishing can encompass document collections, conference proceedings, seminar series, digitization projects, symposia, speeches, reports, papers, standards, software — all the things a university grinds out. Making public the products of the university's research is an essential part of the institutional mission. The tip of the iceberg qualifies for the university presses and high-end commercial journals; the vaster mass of information lies below that surface.

A large amount of publishing is already being done on campuses, outside the purview of university presses, and consisting mostly of things of no particular interest to them: conference proceedings, newsletters, professional papers, policy statements, technical reports, posters, presentations — not to mention theses and dissertations. For materials like these, the library has the most convenient, persistent, and trusted platform for their dissemination and archiving. It is a collector rather than a gate-keeper or an endorser, more analogous perhaps to a steward or a zoo-keeper, if you will. This is a publishing universe where the university presses have no ambitions and no interest. The processing and management of thousands of documents with no apparent commercial value is a more library-like function; and libraries that are involved in the production of these "publications" can manage their collection and preservation more efficiently. At minimum, libraries should seek to provide an available suite of services — called scholarly communication — for the use and furtherance of campus writers, editors, researchers. **Yale University** formerly had a position called "Printer to the University," and this is the closest analogy I can find to the role of the library publisher.

Library publishing can assure the preservation and continuity of publishing efforts already ongoing on campuses: student journals, museum publications, technical reports, extension documents — all kinds of things that the UPs have no truck with. Libraries are positioned to provide services as needed, including post-release services such as hosting, dissemination, cataloging, preservation, and analytics. How many centers on your campus have an office closet full of surplus copies or issues? How many are down to the last copies of their institutional history? Coordinating all these onto a single accessible publishing platform yields opportunities for efficiencies in maintenance, identity branding, archiving, as well as more traditional publishing services like production.

Libraries can also teach campus publishers about the use and value of title pages, copyright pages, and tables of contents — and the virtues of consistency among them. They have an opportunity to help publications make their own metadata up-front and explicit. Clarity here helps everyone, not just catalogers and archivists. I think everyone should be encouraged to publish, and it should be made as

painless and efficient as possible. Doubtless, some pedantic, boring, and misguided works will be issued — but that will be nothing new and will not itself threaten the overall progress of knowledge.

### Advice for Library Publishers

Our library publishing program at Nebraska (known as **Zea Books**) grew out of our institutional repository and the practice of archiving original content there — which turned out to be quite popular with both users and depositors. The repository (running **bepress's** DigitalCommons software) remains our primary platform. We mostly publish eBooks in pdf format, but we offer on-demand production for those who want hard copy, and we prepare Kindle or epub formats when that seems appropriate. Our list is fairly esoteric and obscure; there are no trade books lurking in it. It is all things that more established presses have declined or never would consider.

We use a "permission to publish" agreement with authors that is non-exclusive; they retain copyright and can take their book and go elsewhere if they so choose; either party can cancel the agreement upon 30 days notice. The digital (pdf) versions are made available free; hard copies can be ordered through *Lulu.com*, who does the printing, binding, shipping, billing, and collections; Kindle versions are sold through *Amazon.com*. We receive payments quarterly (or monthly from **Amazon** for Kindle editions) and pay royalties annually. The online pdf and the on-demand hard copy are generated from the same master file, so they match for pagination and layout. We do editing and composition, but no marketing beyond posting to suggested or appropriate online venues or listservs. Some authors are energetic promoters and generate surprising amounts of revenue; others are content to simply have the work available. There are no returns, no free & review, no freight costs, no discounts, no commissions (other than the cut that *Lulu.com* keeps) — none of the many little leaks and operating costs that make it so hard for publishers to stay in the black. We produce color or black and white, hardcover or paperback, in a limited array of sizes: 8.5 x 11, 6 x 9, and 8 x 8 inches. We do not charge authors for our services. Our online lists can be seen at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/zeabook/> and our on-demand offerings at <http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/unlib>.

In addition to the monograph program, we also use the repository to host more than a dozen journals originating on- and off-campus. Most are peer-reviewed; all are free access; and we claim ownership of none of the content.

I recognize that Nebraska's specific path is ultimately not transferrable. We have so far found no clear way to "scale up" or rationalize production; it is artisanal rather than industrial. But every library is different, and the wonderful thing about start-ups is the freedom to invent and experiment. Following is some free advice that new practitioners may or may not wish to apply.

- Avoid things that are broken, like the bookselling trade and the peer-review/tenure treadmill.

- Own as little as possible, content as well as inventory — so you have nothing to lose.
- Focus on instructional materials and items for the scholarly record.
- Build within existing infrastructure; avoid taking on overhead.
- Outsource non-unique services, especially "back office" functions like fulfillment, collections, etc.
- Selling costs are eliminated when you give it away.
- Don't be afraid to practice basic publishing skills (proofreading, copy-editing) and to acquire new skills for typesetting, imaging, design, and production (InDesign, Photoshop, Acrobat). If you love books, you will enjoy learning how they are made.
- Look for "shovel-ready"; beware of "Winnie-the-Pooh" projects that get stuck halfway out.
- Staff the publishing unit carefully; you need people who are on board with the approach and will not hinder the work.
- Respond to the needs of the faculty. Their trust and appreciation are the measure of your success.

### Mea Culpa

I recognize that my argument here is overly rhetorical, repetitive, hyperbolic, and perhaps even circular; and I apologize for that to whatever readers remain. **Bob Nardini** invited me to contribute to this special issue and I foolishly agreed without hesitating or considering. Then he also invited a bunch of well respected publishers and/or scholars, folks with extensive backlists, employees, etc., all the trappings of having achieved a certain *gravitas*. I expect mine to be the dissenting opinion or minority report.

I think **Bob** invited me because he had heard a talk I gave at the Library Publishing Coalition meeting in Kansas City in March. That program included one other speaker and a planned group activity, so my time was capped at 10 minutes, and the topic was "Should library publishing follow the same model of acquisitions as more traditional publishers?" In ten minutes you don't have much time for niceties or qualifiers or hedges, so I just let it all hang out. One press person in the audience was quite incensed and took me to task afterwards for the duration of the group activity. But several days later a university press director wrote me that it was the best thing he heard the whole meeting. The Library Publishing Coalition arranged to publish the texts of the talks from the meeting in the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* (<http://jlscc-pub.org>), whose peer reviewer derided my contribution in dismissive and hurtful language that the editors will not permit me to quote. (The piece is forthcoming nonetheless.)

So writing this piece has been fraught with concerns. I feel obliged to uphold the side of

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the library publishers, who seem to me at times in peril of being patronized or hegemonized by the more established presses, but I am very aware of the idiosyncratic quality of our experience at Nebraska and the outré nature of my own personal views. I don't wish to offend the traditional publishers, or to stir up trouble with the university presses. I have (or used to have) some dear friends in that world, and I am not ashamed to have spent 25 years as a publisher — all of it at start-ups or small presses in the \$3 million to \$20 million range.

Some worthy organizations, including the Library Publishing Coalition, have enunciated the mission and role of library publishing far better than I can. All I hope to contribute here is a somewhat salty critique and antidote to the frequently bland and ameliorist narrative of “synergies” — in which libraries are taken to school by consultants who cannot see the forest of opportunities lying beyond the trees most frequently and habitually watered (usually by the tears of authors).

I believe the academy has room for both library and university press publishing. I believe this because each has a radically different role and mission. I do not think that either one has the solution to the other's problems. I don't see library publishing initiatives as opposed to the university presses, but I think they are better off independent of them. I want library

publishers to “come out of Babylon” (as **Bob Marley** might say) — to leave behind the ownership-based, property-accumulating, copyright-hoarding, commercially-driven publishing model practiced by the corporate giants and imitated to various degrees by academic presses struggling for self-sufficiency.

Library publishing is an opportunity to jettison the things that make commercial and university press publishing unpleasant at times: the constant scrambling for sales, the interminable meetings, the tyrannical deadlines, the anxious sales projections, the radioactive inventory whose value decays every day, the backwash of returns, the frenzy of being out-of-stock, the chewed-over catalog copy, the seasonal ups and downs .... I no longer feel obligated to read the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*; for what I do, it just doesn't matter; and frankly, I don't miss it. Most recently my desktop has been occupied with the return of black-footed ferrets to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, revisions to a translated 17th-century German music encyclopedia (**Praetorius' Syntagma Musicum II, De Organographia**) proposed by an expert reader, composition of a 1,000-page reference on the *Historical Common Names of Great Plains Plants*, and layout of a collaborative study of the methods of the pioneering Italian educator **Loris Malaguzzi**. It is tremendously gratifying to work face-to-face with the author-creator, and not at arm's length through an editorial or promotional bureaucracy. Accommodations and compromises are more easily and

conveniently made without the involvement of multiple departments or the satisfaction of numerous egos each needing a win.

If there remains anyone I have not offended, I'm sorry if you feel left out. My object has not been to deliver Hamlet's whipping to anybody, but rather to point out that we all have opportunities to do better. What **Thomas Hooker** called “A True Sight of Sin” is necessary before reformation can take hold. If we repeatedly tell ourselves how wonderful we are, we will only sink deeper into quicksand. All of us have a chance to do more and do better. In fact, the universe of publishable materials has never been more exciting and energizing. There is more than enough to go around. To those who would say “that's not real publishing” or “not good publishing,” I can only say: it's not a contest. We are all seeking to serve the communication needs of scholars and researchers. The Copyright Office defines publishing as “offering copies for distribution,” and that's enough for me. We can all get judgmental, or we can each take advantage of the opportunities that the new technology has handed us. 🐾