Reengineering Scholarly Connnunication: A Role for University Presses?

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Scott Bennett has challenged all of us in higher education to put on our thinking caps to see if we can come up with a better way of organizing our system of scholarly communication as we enter further into the electronic age. Not content to accept the problem as just that of constructing "an orderly economic transition between print and electronic publication," he asks us to take this opportunity to reexamine the underlying rationale for the whole system, especially the role that "formal publication" plays in it.

I heartily agree that the time is ripe for such a probing inquiry into the structure of scholarly communication, and I concur with Bennett's assessment of the system we have now as "seriously crippled and unlikely to survive" in its present form for much longer. As he notes, the system was declared to be "in crisis" as long ago as 1979, when the Report of the National Enquiry into Scholarly Communication was issued. That report, unfortunately, did not get the attention it deserved, and only a weak effort was mounted to follow up its recommendations. Had a stronger effort been made, we might not find ourselves in the predicament we do now—although it was too early then to predict just how revolutionary an impact the changes in technology already on the horizon at that time would have on scholarly communication twenty years later.

Interdependencies in Scholarly Communication

The basic thrust of that report, however, was right on target:

> During the period of the Enquiry we came to realize more clearly than any of us had earlier realized the truth of one axiom: the various constituencies involved in scholarly communication—the scholars themselves, the publishers of books and learned journals, the research librarians, the learned societies—are all components of a single system and are thus fundamentally dependent upon each other. Moreover, we found that this single system in all its parts is highly sensitive to influence from two outside factors—the actions of the funding agencies, and the developments of the new technologies. Given this interdependence among the various components and influences within the system for scholarly communication, it follows that the numerous problems which the system faces can be effectively solved only if the individuals working within one part of the system are fully mindful of the other parts before decisions are taken. What is called for, therefore, is markedly increased consultation among the leaders in the various components and influences. Let us hope that ways can be found to make such give-and-take a regular practice in the process of decision

making. (1)

This call for focusing on the interdependencies within the system as a key to arriving at a satisfactory solution to the crisis has, unfortunately, been ignored in many of the recent initiatives. There has been a regrettable tendency to look at changes in copyright law and practice as a panacea for all the ills that afflict the system. Because academic libraries especially have been hard hit by the steep rise in science journal prices, and because the vast majority of those journals are issued by commercial publishers, librarians have tended to focus singlemindedly on solutions that will cope with that one problem. Copyright has become a popular scapegoat because it is the mechanism by which intellectual property rights, originally owned by members of the academy, have been transferred outside and then used as the basis for charging high fees for libraries to buy them back in the form of journal subscriptions—a process that looks patently irrational.

Such appears to have been the motivating rationale behind two projects emanating from the library community—the Copyright Policy Task Force of the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN) (2) and the Task Force on Intellectual Property Rights in an Electronic Environment of the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). (3) Entirely apart from ignoring the political obstacles to changing the copyright law (4), however, these two groups started out by paying no attention to the effects that such changes, in law and in practice, would have on university-based publishers, and it was only belatedly, once voices from that sector entered the discussion, that recognition of interdependency was given any weight at all in the groups' deliberations. (5) A general myopia seems to pervade the academy these days, as, for example, when scientists take no account of the effect their publishing habits may have on the chances of their humanist colleagues to find publishing outlets. (6)

Scott Bennett, to his credit, does not fall into this trap, and his article reveals him to be more ready to explore paths that take account of the interdependencies of the system than some of the proposals advanced by his fellow librarians. (7) Despite his close acquaintance with university presses (8). however, he still doesn't factor them much into his equation for the paths to solution he outlines. “We must look for ways,” he says, “to bring faculty and researchers, librarians, and computer managers together for collaborative work, building on our common stake in scholarly communication and sharing our substantial expertise for reengineering it.” Why not university presses, too? Don't they have a “stake” in the system and the “expertise” to help reengineer it? His only explicit reference to university presses occurs in a note, where he dismisses their contribution “in exploring electronic publication” in part because “they have little presence in journal publishing.” It is certainly true that the role university presses play in science journal publishing pales by comparison with that of commercial publishers and learned societies, but they do collectively issue 464 journals (9), and the importance of these journals to the liberal arts at least is unquestionable. Moreover, many presses, or groups of presses, are now engaged in a wide variety of electronic publishing projects—seventy-three in all involving thirty-seven presses officially participating in the initiative of "University Presses in the Networked Information Environment" jointly sponsored by the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) and the Association of American University Presses (AAUP)—and, as Bennett well knows, these are projects in which the presses are collaborating already with libraries and computer centers on their campuses. Does he think these are of little significance?

Whether he does or not, his ignoring the part played by university presses, historically and potentially, in the system of scholarly communication leads him to an analysis of the "economically irrational" manner in which the system operates that is skewed in sometimes misleading ways. This may be seen first in what he says about the "disassociation of supply and demand" in the marketplace for scholarly writing.

The University Press and "Market Demand"

Bennett talks about the relationship between scholarly publishing and sales as though it were a relatively new instance of market failure. But is it really? The history of the beginning of the modern American research university and the rise of the university press shows otherwise. Nicholas Murray Butler, later president of Columbia University, observed in 1890, for example, that "marked activity" in original research had arisen at Columbia in the last few years, but its results could not be published through existing channels because such "contributions to knowledge are always of a technical character and usually destitute of commercial value." (10) Daniel Coit Gilman, who became the first president of The Johns Hopkins University on its establishment in 1876, strongly believed in the importance of a press, saying in 1878 (when the press at that university was launched into existence under the direction of librarian Nicholas Murray, who happened to be an uncle of Nicholas Murray Butler), "It is one of the noblest duties of a university to advance knowledge, and to diffuse it not merely among those who can attend the daily lectures—but far and wide." (11) A press was needed, he realized, because "American scholars, particularly in the sciences, met difficulty in having their research published"—in other words, there was insufficient demand in the marketplace for it at that time. What is little appreciated or remembered nowadays is that university presses were originally set up, in fact, to publish scientific journals. The first two publications of the press at Johns Hopkins were the American Journal of Mathematics and the American Chemical Journal (the latter turned over to the American Chemical Society in 1914). (13) The disassociation of supply and demand," then, was the very basis of the rationale for university-based publishing in the first place, not a new phenomenon just affecting us today.

What happened, of course, is that on the wake of the Second World War, during which collaboration between universities and the government set the stage for the spectacular growth of scientific research thereafter (14), some enterprising individuals like Robert Maxwell saw an opportunity to cash in on this development and began the process of providing the supply of new journals to meet the demand fueled by government-funded research in both universities and the private sector for more, and ever more specialized, outlets for publication. It was only in the early 1970s that some glimmer of the impending economic irrationality of this whole enterprise, from the universities' (but not from the commercial publishers') point of view, began to surface, as librarians experienced new pressures on their budgets and started the process of reallocating more money to journals than to monographs—a process that has caused such problems for university presses over the past decade. (15) Later, the "serials crisis" received recognition as the primary affliction from which academic libraries were suffering, leading to a narrow-minded, almost obsessive fixation on "taking back the copyrights" as the path to financial salvation. (16)

Throughout all this time, however, it was clear to university presses that the market alone could never support the publication of scholarly monographs. That is the reason why presses, with few exceptions, had to be subsidized heavily by their parent universities—and also the reason why, when universities began to cut back on those subsidies beginning in the 1980s, presses resorted to publishing more books in areas where markets were still reasonably viable—regional titles, reference books, and paperbacks for course adoption, for example. The reduction in purchases of monographs by libraries, nearly 25 percent since 1985 according to ARL statistics, only undermined the market further, but there never was a truly commercial market for these books to begin with. As editor-in-chief at Princeton University Press in the late 1980s, I was already very concerned about the consequences of "disassociation between supply and demand" for Latin American studies. The press was finding it then ever more difficult to continue publishing monographs in this field, especially historical studies, even though a goodly number of these titles were winning prizes from scholarly associations. (17)

This disassociation is thus not new to presses, but it is now more starkly present than ever. Our recent publication of a book at Penn State about conversion to Islam in Central Asia over a period of six centuries (18) was a sobering experience in this respect. Despite winning four awards, the book has sold fewer than 200 copies in hardback and 500 copies in paperback in nearly two years. It is certainly "economically irrational" to publish such a book, yet the awards suggest that there is a real need for this book as a contribution to scholarship. Perhaps we need to think about redefining what constitutes "demand" in the academic marketplace? Is value to be measured only by the criteria of sales? Such would seem to be the assumption implicit in the argument Bennett makes about the relationship between supply and demand for scholarly writing.

The Role of University Presses

If the market never was, from the beginning, expected to be the sole determinant of what scholarship can justifiably be published, how should we react to the partial market failure that is now occurring? (I say "partial" because science journals especially—unlike many journals and monographs published by university presses—do not rely only on sales to the academic community; the suit against Texaco was brought to protect the important market for such journals in the private sector, but it remains to be seen whether commercial publishers will find this part of the market sufficient to sustain their journal operations if academic library cancellations proceed much further.) As his preferred option, Bennett finds "especially promising . . . those [initiatives] pursued by a relative handful of faculty and research entrepreneurs who are creating electronic alternatives to conventional print publication," which he deems now increasingly "dysfunctiona" because of its "high cost" relative to the role of "economic rationing" it now plays in the system—namely, serving as "an archive of scholarly inquiry." Presumably, then, he is among those favoring the "Electronic Scholarly Publishing Program" that was announced late in 1995 by the AAU/ARL Research Libraries Project. By encouraging AAU/ARL universities to establish a pool of money, with each university contributing $30,000, the program hopes to "provide between five and eight three-year grants of $75,000 to $100,000 each to fund start-up costs of electronic journals and scholarly resources." (19) The recipients and managers of these funds will be the "faculty and research entrepreneurs" whose initiative Bennett applauds. I applaud their initiative, too, but wonder if this is the most economically rational use of scarce resources. This program confines the role of university presses to some ill-defined future time when their help might be solicited "for sustaining the resource beyond the involvement of the initial proposers." (To be fair, the program also consigns "collaboration with university libraries" to this later role.) But why not take advantage of the skills that university press staff can provide at the outset? These skills come at a cheaper price, usually, than the time of faculty. As my fellow press director Colin Day, a member of the AAU/ARL Task Force on Intellectual Property, reminded his colleagues on the task force as long ago as 1993:

> There are many ways in academic institutions in which we lose sight of the real costs. In particular. the time of academics is often treated as a free good. It is not. Indeed, by a formidably rigorous system, people with exceptional talents are selected to research and teach in their field. Those talents are rare. Society bears a cost when those talents are not being devoted to the task for which they are exceptionally appropriate . . . . Faculty are well paid. It makes no financial sense to divert to faculty

> members tasks currently done by skilled but comparatively lowly paid [unfortunately!] publishing and library staffs. (20)

The role it makes sense to assign to faculty, of course, is what Bennett calls "the certification and filtering of scholarship." This is what draws most directly on their own special expertise. University presses have become skilled over many years at organizing this expertise into a system that serves the publication of books well, through the process of peer review managed by press editorial staff involving both formal reports solicited from academic specialists and final review by editorial boards drawn from university faculty. Although presses have not played the same role in publication of their journals, beyond working with faculty at the outset in the selection of editors and editorial advisory boards who then manage the process more or less on their own, there may in fact be need for presses to play a more active and ongoing role in editorial management of journals in the future. As journals continue to proliferate, with many new ones going online, how is one to decide which journals are worth spending one's time to browse and read? Even if articles are peer reviewed in some fashion before acceptance in these journals, how about the journal itself as a whole? There is widespread suspicion in the academy today that the proliferation of journals has already far exceeded the value they bring to the academic enterprise. As libraries go through the process of canceling subscriptions, a sort of retrospective evaluation is already under way. If there had been a process for evaluating journals, not just articles, in place fifteen years ago, maybe a good many of those 30,000 new science journals that were launched in the 1980s wouldn't have survived for long and libraries wouldn't be bearing the costs of deaccessioning now. It might be worthwhile exploring the role that presses could play in serving as a vehicle for a formal process of evaluating joumals, those already in existence and those still to come. One librarian has already proposed such an idea with respect to dealing with the problem of "the increasing glut of vanity publishing in webspace [which] is a growing barrier to scholarly communication." Ross Dennison suggests that universities

> form an accrediting body for cyberspace documents . . . . Certified documents would be expected to be scholarly, roughly on a par with the information published by university presses. Each certified document would be identified by the accrediting body's trademark [a university press imprint in the form of an electronic "watermark"?]. This trademark would allow searches to be restricted to only certified cyberdocuments, thereby eliminating vanity items. It would also permit legal prosecution of "impostors." Each member [of the accrediting body] would set up its own procedure for certification, perhaps using an existing university press or creating a new faculty review committee.(21)

I can agree with Bennett, then, that "increasingly in an environment abundantly rich in information, the scarce good is the investigator's time," but

I have to question whether this means that “the need for formal validation of other scholars' work recedes somewhat” under these circumstances. I can also agree with him that “together, we can create the tools to search for and filter networked information for the individual researcher, so that the immense global flow of information buoys our work rather than overwhelms it.” Only I would have hoped that he could have seen, as Dennison does, a role for university presses in what we can all accomplish “together.”

One project that holds promise as a demonstration of what collaboration involving university presses can achieve is “University Publishing in the Electronic Age,” an effort now beginning to get under way within the universities belonging to the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (the eleven Big Ten schools plus the University of Chicago). Here there is a real opportunity to experiment with the allocation of costs and functions to achieve maximum efficiency in the production and dissemination of scholarly work. In a recent CNI-sponsored study of how costs will shift and change in the new environment of electronic publishing, it is assumed that SGML coding and archiving will be two new functions publishers will need to undertake and pay for. (22) What may be true for commercial publishing, however, may work out differently in university-based publishing. It may turn out that, rather than have presses assume these added duties and costs, it will be more practical for other entities in the CIC universities to provide them, perhaps with some universities offering centralized service for the entire consortium. Under this model, presses would concentrate on providing content—peer reviewed, copy edited, and perhaps designed to some degree—and then other stages in the process of publication would be carried out elsewhere, the universities benefiting from the shared access to this new knowledge throughout the consortium.

From a model of each press producing entirely on its own a stream of publications to be sold in the general marketplace, we might thereby move to a model of shared production and distribution within consortia. These products of the CIC universities then might be sold or licensed to the market outside the consortium, or even bartered with other consortia having similar intellectual goods to exchange. There would be a kind of free trade zone or common market within each consortium, and normal market arrangements beyond. Eventually, as cooperation among now independently operating parts of universities became a more familiar mode of behavior, one might even envisage a time when universities in the United States as a whole (and perhaps including Canadian universities as well and, over time, universities in other countries) could form an overarching consortium of consortia to become relatively self-sufficient in the production and distribution of scholarly knowledge. (23) A market would still exist outside for some of its products—scientific knowledge needed by industry, certainly, and books intended for wider audiences—but much of the costs and benefits would be internalized, with the opportunity to achieve a greater degree of economic rationality in the system as a whole than exists now, when so much of value added comes from commercial publishers at exorbitant expense.

Within a consortial system, copyright might eventually cease to perform its traditional role as a cost-recovery mechanism, if all publishing costs were paid up front and distribution within that system were to be done online “free” to the end-user (who might, however, choose to pay a special fee to have hard copy printed out and bound). Copyright would then remain important (as it has always been in European law that recognizes “moral rights” as part of copyright) primarily as a guarantee of a work's integrity and the author's claim to be recognized as the creator of it—as a safeguard against plagiarism and misrepresentation, in other words.

This is heady stuff to contemplate, and hardly anywhere near on the horizon yet (not least because it runs against the grain of what is being proposed now for privatization of the National Information Infrastructure and, by extension, the Global Information Infrastructure), but the mere vision may help stimulate thinking about the whole system of interdependencies that Scott Bennett has asked us to keep in mind when considering what “reengineering scholarly communication” will require. And I daresay it will take such a radical reengineering to bring about a world in which, at least for universities, copyright “has outlived its usefulness . . . [and we can] fulfill the promise of extending the most basic human right, the right to knowledge, to all cultures and individuals.” (24)

(1) R. M. Lumiansky, “Foreword,” *Scholarly Communication: The Report of the National Enquiry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. xi.

(2) *Model University Policy Regarding Faculty Publication in Scientific and Technical Scholarly Journals: A Background Paper and Review of the Issues*, July 1993.

(3) *Report of the AAU Task Force on Intellectual Property Rights in an Electronic Environment*, May 1994/

(4) I discuss these political obstacles in “Towards the Year 2001,” *Scholarly Publishing* 24/1 (1992): 26-27.

(5) In response to criticisms of an earlier draft by myself, Janet Fisher, and others, the TRLN Task Force inserted into its final report the following qualification: “Research published by university and most association presses remains essentially within the community of university research scholars and, thus, under university control. No change in current copyright transfer

practices is needed with these scholarly presses because they share the fundamental values of university-based scholarly research and a common vision for the future of scholarly communication.” See its *Model University Policy*, p. vi. The AAU/ARL Task Force initially included no university press representative at all, but, after some lobbying by the AAUP, it was persuaded to invite Colin Day, director of the University of Michigan Press, to be an ex officio member. His input undoubtedly accounts for such passages as the following in the task force's report: “The problem is not that university presses are poorly managed. It is, rather, that they are not being asked by universities to do some of the things they can do well and that most urgently need to be done, especially in establishing viable and prestigious alternatives to expensive commercial journals in science, technology, and medicine. They are not provided with the necessary financial basis for such activities, nor are they brought into strong collaboration with the university's other information management agencies. From this perspective, universities are arguably wasting the publishing assets they have built over many years at precisely the time when the university's inability to control the costs of scholarly communication is most evident and most threatening to the vitality of the research mission of the university.” *Report of the AAU Task Force*, p. l31.

(6) I discuss this myopia more fully in “Towards the Year 2001,” 35. Another good example of it may be seen in the complete absence of any reference to university presses in the section devoted to “Diverse Constituents within the University” (or even anywhere in the index) in Kenneth Crews, *Copyright, Fair Use, and the Challenge for Universities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 14-18—even though this book was published by a university press! Any promotion of an aggressive policy on “fair use” within universities must consider its effect on university presses; otherwise, universities risk shooting themselves in the foot by adopting practices that can only damage their own presses. Crews came to appreciate the role of university presses more as he skillfully negotiated the formulation of guidelines for electronic reserve systems in academic libraries, guidelines that have been formally endorsed by the AAUP.

(7) A recent example of a proposal that takes no account of universities' own stake in intellectual property as owned by their presses is “On My Mind: Copyright Could Be Wrong,” *American Libraries* (February 1996) by Bert R. Boyce, dean of the School of Library and Information Science at Louisiana State University, who argues: “Current copyright law impedes the progress of science and the useful arts and therefore subverts the explicitly stated intent of those who drafted the primary law of the land. Since it is institutions of higher education that suffer the main economic loss from this unconstitutional law, it is these institutions that should be leading the fight against it.” For a different view of copyright's value for universities, see my “Why Texaco Is Important to University Presses,” *Against the Grain* 7/1 (1995): 1, 14-17.

(8) Bennett worked closely with The Johns Hopkins University Press in launching Project Muse during his tenure as library director at that university. He was also speaker at a plenary session of the 1994 AAUP annual meeting devoted to "On-Campus Library/Press Cooperation in a Networked Environment."

(9) This statistic comes from the AAUP Titles and Journals Published Survey' for 1994. This number does not include the journals published by the American Chemical Society, American Mathematical Society, American Psychiatric Press, and the Modem Language Association of America, which are associate members of the AAUP.

(10) Gene R. Hawes, *To Advance Knowledge: A Handbook on American University Press Publishing* (New York: AAUP, 1967), p. 30.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Ibid.

(13) Ibid.

(14) One part of this fascinating story is told by Robert Gannon in *Hellions of the Deep: The Development of American Torpedoes in World War II* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

(15) See the landmark report by Bernard M. Fry and Herbert S. White on *The Economics and Interaction of the Publisher-Library Relationship in the Production and Use of Scholarly and Research Journals* (Washington, DC: National Science Foundation, 1975).

(16) This is the major theme of the reports from the Triangle Research Libraries Network and the AAU/ARL Task Force cited above in notes 2 and 3. For a more nuanced approach to the question of copyright, see Anthony M. Cummings et al., *University Libraries and Scholarly Communication* (New York: Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 1992), especially chapter 11, "Economic and Legal Issues."

(17) See my "Latin American Studies and the Crisis in Scholarly Communication," *LASA Forum* 23/4 (1993): 10-14.

(18) Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tukles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

(19) "Electronic Scholarly Publishing: A New Form of Scholarly Communication," October 1995, 1.

(20) Colin Day, “A Framework for Thinking about the Issues,” 15 September 1993.

(21) Russ Dennison, “Accreditation May Be the Answer,” *Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues* 160/3 (27 March 1996).

(22) Robert Ubell Associates for the Coalition for Networked Information, “Cost Centers and Measures in the Networked Information Value Chain,” 25 March 1996: 24-25.

(23) For any such cooperative endeavor to be ultimately successful on a wider scale, more universities would have to become involved in paying the costs, other than by just purchasing books and journals for their libraries as they do now. This is not a new idea: the National Enquiry in 1979 included this among its recommendations, that “universities without presses become active participants in the publishing process as sponsors of work produced on their campuses.” It went on to elaborate: “The publishing initiative in the United States is now concentrated in the relative handful of universities that have presses . . . and the burden of subsidizing scholarly publication falls on these same institutions. The other 1,500 or so universities and four-year colleges neither participate in the publishing process nor help pay the cost. We believe that they could and should participate constructively in both functions. There are a number of ways in which they could do so, ranging from title subsidies to participation in a consortium (such as the University Press of New England . . .).” *Scholarly Communication*, pp. 24-25.

(24) Jerry D. Campbell, “Copyright, Public Policy, and Digital Libraries: Searching for First Principles,” in *Copyright, Public Policy, and the Scholarly Community* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 1995).