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Sydney University Press: A Model for Combining Open Access with Sales

Susan Murray-Smith *

Abstract

Sydney University Press was restarted in 2003 to provide print-on-demand books from the University Library's digital collections. Since 2005, it has also been publishing new research titles. Through its co-location with the University's repository, it has begun to explore Open Access in conjunction with commercial publication. A number of SUP titles are freely available chapter-by-chapter in the University repository, with a link to purchase the printed volume. This paper explores some of the issues around scholarly publishing in the digital age: exposure, expertise and reputation vs commercial imperatives; digital production and flexible uses, and the role of the scholarly publisher.

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* Business Manager, Sydney University Press and Digital Initiatives, University of Sydney Library.

1. Introduction – The Role Of The University And The University Press

Universities have a dual role in teaching and undertaking research for the betterment of society. Implicit in these roles is the idea that the university as a publicly funded institution will “give back” to the community, sharing research insights and results, contributing to public debate, and shaping social policy.

We see the university press’ role as adding value to academic research by creating a package called a “book”. There are a number of quality control activities in the publishing process that transform an author’s writing into the finished product.

Underlying these simplistic statements is a number of tensions – to what extent should universities commercialise the results of research? What role does a book play in providing research in an easily digestible form? What are the benefits for authors, universities and the community in the continuation of the academic publishing process?

2. The Imperative To Publish

Researchers have a number of external and internal pressures to publish.

Publishing has traditionally been seen as a method of formal communication of research results. This can help build a reputation within your field of expertise outside the researchers with whom you have direct contact. A sizable publication output is useful for career advancement – promotion, esteem factors and general standing in the academic community. But communication of research can also be as informal as dialogue with colleagues, and no less beneficial in the development of ideas.

External pressures to publish include career progression and funding opportunities. The Australian federal government funds research based on a number of measures, one of which is the Higher Education Research Data Classification (HERDC).¹ All university staff are required to count the number of books, book chapters, journal articles and conference papers they publish each year. Points are allocated on the basis of 1 point per journal article, book chapter or conference paper and SIX points for a single authored monograph. Funds are then made available to universities based on this quantitative method – X thousand dollars per point (the amount varies from year to year). Attempts to assess the quality of research output are also being developed, most recently through the Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative (ERA).²

Schemes such as HERDC are skewed towards ‘commercial’ publishing although in recent years evaluation of submitted works has become more flexible and in some categories can include Open Access works. Books are only considered if they are commercially published, and until recently the relevant government department maintained a list of acceptable commercial publishers. For conference papers and

¹ Higher Education Research Data Collection, available at http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/online_forms_services/higher_education_research_data_collection.htm (Accessed 1 July 2009).

² Excellence in Research for Australia Initiative, available at <http://www.arc.gov.au/era/default.htm> (Accessed 1 July 2009).

journal articles, peer review and some national or international prominence of the event or journal are essential to qualify for HERDC points.

But can Open Access fulfil an academic's publishing requirements? Open Access now covers a number of different forms of publishing, with varying levels of quality control. At the highest level, OA can rival traditional publishing, with strict selection policies, peer review and high quality editing and design. This occurs mainly within journal publishing, primarily in sciences and medicine. At the lowest level, OA can be an author 'releasing' their work through a personal website, with no hurdles at all.

Another form of OA publishing is the institutional repository where staff can place research papers. Rules as to the type and quality of material vary from place to place, although the majority of content is either pre or post-print published material or grey matter such as working papers. However, there is not necessarily any quality control on what is deposited in repositories, and except for post-prints it is unlikely the content has been exposed to peer review or undergone any editorial refinement.

So where OA publishing equates with a quality process, and is recognised as such, OA can fulfil the esteem and quality publication output requirements of an academic. Projects such as the APSR (Australian Partnership for Sustainable Repositories) have endeavoured to ensure that OA repositories are sustainable, and harvestable by search engines. Repository content is easily found in Google, Google Scholar, WorldCat and other global search engines. This allows academic's work to be found by colleagues and other interested researchers that may be unknown to the author, and can thus fulfil the needs for the author's work to be known to a wider audience.

3. SUP's Position in the University of Sydney

Sydney University Press (SUP) is part of the Sydney eScholarship (SeS) division of the University of Sydney Library. SeS is a strategic initiative of the library to explore how the library can add value to the university through partnerships and the use of its expertise. The longest running area within SeS is the Sydney Digital Library (SETIS) where for fifteen years staff have been creating XML versions of out-of-copyright Australian material for free publication on the web. Over 300 early Australian novels and explorers' journals are available. The other main services are the University Repository, where various research outputs are stored and made available via the Web, and Digital Project Analysis, where staff advise researchers on best practice in creation, storage and retrieval of digital research data.

These varied areas mean that academics have a number of options in terms of making their research available, depending on whether they want open access, value added through commercial publishing, archival options or just advice. A combination of options is also available.

3.1 SUP's Publishing Aims

- Important, interesting, Australian books based on high quality research;
- Primarily publishing in humanities, social sciences and "social issues";
- Shared investment and risk for publisher and authors;
- Digital production and publishing to ensure longevity, flexible use, multiple formats; and

- Addressing both tangible and intangible goals – commercial sales, improving exposure and promoting expertise, building the University’s reputation, but also recognising government and society imperatives for public access to the results of publicly funded research.

4. Adding Value To Content Through Publishing

Thompson³ suggests that there are six areas where a publisher can add value. They are:

- Content acquisition;
- Financial investment and risk taking;
- Content development;
- Quality control;
- Management and coordination; and
- Sales and marketing.

How we approach each of these areas differentiates SUP from other publishers and provides our unique selling proposition.

4.1 Content Acquisition

We ask that authors provide us with a book proposal and, where possible, the full manuscript. Submission of the manuscript gives us an idea of writing style as well as the author’s approach to structure and allows us to:

- Assess market interest;
- Evaluate research quality;
- Compare the manuscript with competing titles; and
- Build a realistic timeline to publish.

SUP does not limit its publishing to authors from its own institution. This allows us to choose from a wide range of authors and topics, and minimises the perception of “vanity publishing”. Increased competition and lack of publishing opportunities, matched with the pressure to publish means that we have a broad pool of talent to choose from, and can select the books we decide have the most potential.

Although university presses are usually obliged to publish faculty histories and other more “popular” publications, SUP has attempted to stream these projects through a parallel process. To this end, SUP recently started a new imprint called Darlington Press for these projects, allowing the SUP imprint to be reserved for scholarly works.

³ J Thompson, *Books in the Digital Age: The Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Publishing in Britain and the United States* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

4.2 Financial Investment And Risk Taking

Publishing is a business that requires a fair amount of investment and risk. Most publishers attempt to minimise risk through the development of a publishing “list”, where some titles are more likely to generate revenue and balance out against the more niche or risky projects. We consider niche products to be those with a defined target audience of 100 or less.

Costs in publishing can be incurred at the acquisition, production and print stages of a project. Acquisition through proposal avoids commissioning costs and advances, and the use of print-on-demand (POD) means that there are no sunk costs in a print run that need to be recouped. The majority of costs for SUP are therefore in the production process and in marketing and release. Although POD results in a higher print cost per unit, we try to keep the final retail price affordable, so that books are not priced out of the market.

SUP uses a shared risk approach to publication, asking for a production subsidy where possible to cover some of the external costs such as copy-editing and cover design. Alternatives to actual funds may be the use of resources, such as the use of a research assistant to proof or make references across chapters consistent. This has allowed us to choose more projects that would be considered “niche” by the criteria above, and in some cases, invest more in the development of the work so that it has a stronger potential market interest.

An outcome of the shared investment approach is the flexibility it provides to the release of the book. With less upfront investment to recoup, SUP has explored simultaneous release of the printed book for sale and the electronic version for free download through Open Access repositories. Many other publishers are also experimenting with different combinations of paid and free access to content in the print and electronic environments. The major issue is whether free electronic access cannibalises or promotes sales of the work. So far it has been difficult for us to give a definitive response as, in some cases, the electronic copies are in a number of repositories, making it time-consuming to compile use statistics to compare against print sales. One thing which is important in the hybrid environment is to be able to measure the impact of the work, so analysis of citation rates and other non-financial measures will contribute to our assessment of the worth of the hybrid release approach.

4.3 Content Development

Increasingly other publishers have moved away from the book proposal process, to a more proactive form of content acquisition. This usually involves using market research to identify gaps in the reading market, developing a book structure and finding an author to write. Even within our current acquisition process, we consider the book proposal a starting point for the final structure of the book, and we work with authors and editors to build the final contents list.

One area where this has been successful has been with works of collected essays sourced from a conference. The conference programme and papers provide a useful basis for the development of a book, particularly when peer review has been undertaken, providing an initial level of quality assurance and market interest. Although based on a conference, the edited work can move beyond the event, drawing

in extra chapters to round out an issue, or address new thinking that has come to light. The final book is much more than just conference proceedings.

One definite advantage of Open Access is the immediacy with which content can be made available. The use of digital publishing methods helps to reduce the lead time between submission and release of the book. Where possible, all submission, copy-editing and layout occur electronically, reducing paper use and the time required to ship it around to the contributors. Our shortest production time from receipt of manuscript to release is three weeks, although the average time to release is three months.

4.4 Quality Control

Quality control is the most important feature of the publishing process and is not limited to traditional publishing. As mentioned above, quality is an important aspect of the acquisition and content development processes. SUP books also go through several quality assessment stages, from copyediting to proofing, so that errors and inconsistencies are identified and corrected. We try to follow best practice through the use of external readers and professional editors to shape the book. It is important that quality control is evident in the final product – so that SUP is accepted as a publisher of choice.

These processes and concerns are not necessarily different from that of any other traditional or Open Access publisher. The main point of comparison is with unrefined material in open access repositories, which don't utilise peer review, professional copyediting and proofing and professional layout and design. It is our experience that appearance still plays a major factor in the assessment of the quality of a product and readers are likely to negatively assess the quality of content if it is presented poorly.

4.5 Sales and Marketing

A unique point of differentiation is the direct-to-customer print-on-demand sales, and the option of making chapters freely available through open access repositories.

SUP sells its books through its own website. Although initially envisaged as primarily direct-to-customer, almost half of our sales are at trade discount to library suppliers and bookshops. We don't use the "sale or return" model except in limited circumstances; most of our trade sales are "firm sale".

The advantage of direct-to-customer is the direct contact with the customer, through formal and informal contact. We are able to let customers know when a book in their discipline is coming out, and receive immediate feedback about books. Customers can register interest in forthcoming titles, which helps us to inform future publishing initiatives.

We have also started to utilise various Web 2.0 technologies to further engage with our authors and customers. We use the Sydney Publishing blog⁴ to announce new releases, discuss publishing trends and topical issues and how they relate to our books. SUP's Facebook page includes book launches, event photos, and a fan base. We have even started to Twitter. While these technologies are not of interest to some

⁴ Sydney Publishing, available at <http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/sydneypublishing/> (accessed 1 July 2009).

of our older readers and authors, we feel it's important to engage with the younger readership and up-and-coming academics.

5. Benefits For Authors, their Institutions and SUP

The ability to take on more niche books means that we can potentially uncover exciting new writers and early career academics and get in at the start of new areas of research. For these authors, being associated with a well-reputed university press can help to bolster their status in the academic community and assist their career aims. HERDC accreditation can formalise their contribution to their institution's research income.

Without an overburdening focus on the financial imperative, we can use other measures such as citation rates, downloads and even the development of research networks to measure the success of SUP titles.

The use of digital technologies including Web 2.0 applications means that authors potentially get greater exposure in the online sphere. They can become part of various online communities and link their work easily and effectively.

The benefits to the university include an increase in media exposure and recognition of expertise of its staff, which enhance the University brand and standing. Over the short time SUP has been in operation, it has contributed over \$250,000 to the University of Sydney through HERDC points granted to publications. SUP and its authors have won several awards for published titles.

As SUP's reputation increases, we are receiving higher quality proposals and more proposals from well regarded academics. This makes the selection process more difficult, and our acceptance rate continues to reduce accordingly.

6. Challenges

The main challenges facing academic publishers – and particularly university presses – are balancing investment and return, ensuring alignment with the brand status of the parent institution and developing a sustainable business model for the future.

SUP is non-profit, and has existed from 2005 on salary subsidy from the Library. Costs above those provided by authors and editors are derived from book sales. So although we talk about increased flexibility in our selection choices, we need to make sure we are making the right choices, so that we cover our costs and can provide the investment we need to make in marketing and promotion of the works to potential readers.

To continue to increase our brand presence we need to be able to attract high profile authors and/or discover the upcoming ones. This potentially requires marketing at the business level, rather than title by title, to develop our presence in the global book market.

The increase of eBook products including dedicated electronic readers and eBook products means that there is significant competition in the electronic space. Many foresee the death of the printed book, making a business model based on print sales unsustainable. The future of the monograph and the collected work also face competition from articles and individual works in the electronic sphere. Sydney

University Press will need to continue to innovate and identify sources of funding to ensure its survival and success.

The discussion over “who pays” that dominates the distinction between Open Access and traditional publishing is worth revisiting here. Traditional publishing is predicated on the idea that the publisher invests in a book’s production, the consumer pays, and the publisher achieves a return for their investment (or covers their costs). The equivalent form of Open Access publishing works by having an institution or association and/or the author invest in the publishing process, but that the consumer doesn’t pay, and there is no financial return.

At a university press level, Open Access is not politically viable unless you are only publishing your own academics – it is difficult to justify the investment in the development of publications from outside your own institution’s research output. So while we at SUP envisage ourselves as attached but not directed by our university’s research output, we need to behave (mostly) as a commercial publisher and seek return for our investment in the books we publish. However as the climate and scholarly communication environment continues to develop, these decisions may need to be reassessed.