Creating a Consolidated Online Catalogue for the University Press Community

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Abstract
The aim of this study was to identify a means by which university presses could sell more books and, specifically, whether the creation of a consolidated online catalogue of press titles would help in this regard. The presses at this time vary considerably in terms of size, resources, and familiarity with online marketing, though all of them are active to some degree online and most identify Amazon as their largest customer. Despite this activity, however, and even for the very largest presses, a presswide catalogue would augment sales by exploiting greater scale, enabling more effective search-engine and other online marketing, by opening up new promotional vehicles, and by strengthening individual press brands by bringing more robust technology to each institution’s efforts.

I. Background and Scope
This project has its roots in a series of discussions concerning the fate of university press publishing. The press world is under a great deal of strain at this time, strain that is worsening under the collapse of the economy. The presses’ problems are being addressed by many people in a variety of ways, the most common being to identify ways to rein in expenses. This project is taking a different tack: rather than seeking a means to reduce costs or scale back programs (both of which may be appropriate actions in some instances), the aim of this report is to identify ways for the presses to sell more books. Since the presses almost always make a gross profit on every copy of every book sold (typically $.58 on every sales dollar, an extrapolation from AAUP data), selling more copies would generate a greater contribution to the presses’ overhead. In effect, the goal of this project is to identify a means by which the presses can market their way out of their financial problems.
The presses are involved in a number of activities, the chief of which is publishing books. Among the other activities are the publishing of journals and the provision of various services (e.g., warehousing) for third parties. Other activities are also beginning to appear; at least one press, for example, is exploring the possibility of publishing scientific datasets. The scope of this project, however, is books alone.

Press books themselves come in a variety of packages: different formats (hardcover, paperback); different media (print or electronic); and different marketing offerings (books sold on a stand-alone basis or books as part of digital aggregations). The primary focus here is the printed book, though much of the discussion applies (or will come to apply) to e-books and, to some extent, to aggregations. The reason for this focus is simply that that is what the presses sell today, and that is what most customers prefer. Of course, this is now changing, and as those changes occur, an online catalogue will evolve with them.

The Association of American University Presses (AAUP) lists 126 member presses in its Directory 2008: Information on 126 Scholarly Presses in the U.S., Canada, and Overseas. These presses include publishers formally linked to parent universities (e.g., Harvard University Press, The University of California Press), presses headquartered outside the U.S. (e.g., Oxford University Press or OUP), and scholarly publishers not affiliated with a university (e.g., The Minnesota Historical Society, The Jewish Publications Society). For purposes of this project, this is a useful typology, which I will turn to below. Beyond the not-for-profit (NFP) academic book publishers are commercial firms (e.g., Palgrave/Macmillan), whose publications are of interest to the research community and often individual titles (e.g., a political memoir by Henry Kissinger) published by trade houses (e.g., Random House). Taken together, all these publications, from a university press monograph at the center to a stray book from Random House on the perimeter, constitute the relevant field for an online catalogue for academic books, but it was only a subset of the AAUP’s extended membership that participated in this study.

The questions put to the interviewees essentially came down to these three:
- What are your press’s current marketing practices, especially insofar as online marketing is concerned? How do other entities (e.g., vendors) fit into these practices?
- What is on your wish list for marketing? If you had extra money, how would you spend it?
- What are your thoughts about the utility of a comprehensive online catalogue for academic books? Would you participate in such a venture were it to be launched?

I do wish to emphasize that this project began with a hypothesis (A consolidated online catalogue would help to sell more academic books) and all the research was conducted to test that hypothesis. Someone simply determined to expose more data about the press world would have asked different questions. Indeed, there are many such questions that I was tempted to probe while working on this project, especially with regard to the publishing programs themselves (what books are the presses publishing and why), but the focus here has been narrow: On the basis of what can be determined about the presses, is there a case to recommend an investment to build a consolidated online catalogue?

I have coined the term “Academilogue,” a compression of “academic” and “catalogue” to use as the name of the prospective online catalogue. This name is a placeholder. No one likes it, but there was a need to call it something. (A prototype site is now under construction, with the name ScholarsCatalog.)

II. Statistical Snapshot

The statistics on the book industry in general are not very reliable. This is because the industry’s sheer diversity and the highly specialized character of some book programs make it hard to track down all the participants. The figures for the university press world are, if anything, better than the average, in large part because the AAUP has put a great deal of effort into this in recent years. But nonetheless, there are problems with the data and also some exceptional situations that must be kept in mind.