Value-Driven Library Publishing Services at Research-Oriented Universities and Small Academic Libraries

Sarah Blenko

Abstract

Library publishing services have become more common over the past two decades, as traditional scholarly publishing models have become less attractive and affordable. These library-driven projects reflect the values underpinning librarianship, most notably support for open access. Library-driven publishing projects also reflect the values and missions of their parent institutions. Most scholarship has focused on the publishing contributions of libraries situated at large, research-oriented institutions, which tend to prioritize faculty interest and operate in a prestige economy. However, small academic libraries, while usually possessing fewer resources, have also undertaken both conventional and more innovative publishing projects that reflect their student-centered and values-driven missions, representing a vital addition to the scholarly publishing landscape.

Keywords: library publishing, academic publishing, scholarly communication, scholarly publishing

Librarianship is a value-driven, mission-driven profession. This is reflected in many of a library’s core activities, but is also true of the developing field of library publishing. Libraries are increasingly experimenting with publishing, as concerns about the traditional publishing model, enthusiasm about open access (OA), and ongoing financial challenges and shifts in the scholarly communication world prompt libraries to invest in new and exciting modes of scholarly output. Most literature surrounding these new library publishing services (LPS) focuses on the compelling projects at large research institutions, especially those associated with university presses. However, in doing so the scholarly communications community largely overlooks the possible contributions of smaller academic libraries.
BLENKO VALUE-DRIVEN LIBRARY PUBLISHING SERVICES

(SALs) to the developing LPS field. While SALs may be unable to undertake projects of quite the same scale, they nonetheless have valuable contributions to make. Moreover, these projects often reflect the culture, mission, and values underpinning these smaller institutions, resulting in innovative and invigorating publishing ventures that offer different benefits from those at SLAs’ larger counterparts.

As professionals, librarians tend to espouse certain values that frame their work. The American Library Association website defines eight ‘Key Action Areas’ “as guiding principles for investment of energies and resources,” amongst which are diversity, equitable access to information and library services, and intellectual freedom (American Library Association). From the highest levels of leadership, these values guide the direction our profession takes; they are openly discussed and imbue the service orientation of the profession (Hicks 2016; Arns & Daniel 2008). These values are present in traditional library activities such as provision of access to resources and reference assistance, but also manifest themselves in the emerging field of library publishing. The rising prices of journal subscriptions, falling purchases of monographs, and coalescing of publishing houses will not be addressed here, but these forces have, in the past 20 years, prompted libraries to move into publishing, an activity that has traditionally been outside their purview (Bonn & Furlough, 2015).

Library publishing has certain characteristics that differentiate it from other forms of academic publishing. Borgman (2007) has discussed how the act of publishing can be as simple as making something public, and LPS did at first take this very basic form. McCormick (2015) has laid out eight core publishing activities associated with traditional publishers: authoring, selection, evaluation/peer review, editing, design, production, marketing and description, and distribution. LPS initiatives may encompass one or more of these, but need not incorporate all of them. Originally arising out of digitization projects that made library holdings available to the public but involved no editorial contributions, LPS have become more comprehensive and taken on a more value-driven tenor in recent years (Bonn & Furlough, 2015). LPS now comprise many types of initiatives, incorporating a number of trends: digitization projects; original publishing, especially of online monographs and more recently textbooks; journal hosting; student work; and collaborations outside the home institution (Bonn & Furlough, 2015). A sizeable body of scholarship has focused specifically on the relationship between university presses and library publishing initiatives — how they should be integrated, whether they should be integrated, etc. (McCormick, 2015; Watkinson, 2015). However, there are approximately 2,500 institutions of higher learning in North America, and only around 100 university presses; many publishing models have been adopted at libraries without incorporating university presses in any way (Mullins et al., 2012).

The values underlying librarianship have been incorporated into LPS projects since the advent of library publishing. In their seminal paper on LPS, Brown et al. (2007) predicted that increasing dependence on electronic sources will make platforms central to the dissemination of knowledge; they also warned that it is “critically important that the university community be able to influence strongly the development of these platforms to insure [sic] that they support long held university values, rather
than allowing them to be driven primarily by commercial incentives” (2007, p.4-5). Platforms have indeed become a central part of many LPS projects, many of which promote and extend OA in what has become a defining characteristic of LPS. The vast majority of library-published material, whether journal, monograph, or less formal “grey literature,” is OA, and only 7% of library publishers charge end-users for their products (Okerson & Holzman 2015). Hahn has cautioned that with regards to OA, library publishing is “not a movement so much as a development,” and that libraries did not set out to evangelize OA but rather have incorporated it into their publishing models as they have moved into LPS (2008, p. 24). Yet even if not originally a driver of the shift towards library publishing, librarians’ code of ethics and preference for equitable access have permeated their publishing projects.

A significant number of academic libraries are now involved in publishing; the Library Publishing Coalition was established in 2014 to connect publishing libraries, and now has over 120 members (Library Publishing Coalition, 2018). While the coalition represents a range of schools, scholarship tends to focus on LPS at large research universities, even without acknowledging this bias (McIntyre et al, 2013; Walters 2012). This trend may be due to the ubiquity of publishing programs at these large schools — in their landmark study, Mullins et al. (2012) found that 75% of libraries in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) published in some form or were interested in doing so. The researchers also found that of those who did publish, almost 90% expressed that they did so in order to change and improve the scholarly publishing system, indicating their mission-driven nature (2012). LPS projects embody librarian-endorsed values such as intellectual freedom and equitable access to information, but librarians’ missions are also intertwined with those of these research universities, which often mention scholarly communication explicitly in their school strategies (Spiro, 2015). The stated mission of Washington University in St. Louis is “to discover and disseminate knowledge, and protect the freedom of inquiry through research, teaching and learning,” and the University of California, Davis acknowledges that central to its position as a large research institution “is the generation, advancement, dissemination and application of knowledge” (Washington University in St. Louis; UC Davis). The mission statements of such large research universities go on to mention students and teaching, but the first point virtually always pertains to scholarship.

The values of these universities are evident in their libraries’ publishing activities. A report by the American Council of Learned Societies (2006) has introduced the concept of three types of economy operating in academia: an economy of prestige, wherein recognition is received for work (important to faculty, and to institutions as a whole); a market economy, where financial incentives prevail (in which traditional publishers operate, and in which parent institutions must ultimately function as well); and a subsidy economy, wherein success is measured by how well goals are met and monetary benefit is secondary (in which libraries usually function). In large research universities, faculty research and the prestige economy are extremely important, influencing the kinds of publishing projects libraries undertake. A 2007 ARL member survey revealed that of those schools with LPS, 88% published journals, 79% published conference papers, and 71% published monographs — high
rates of fairly traditional modes of scholarly output (Hahn, 2008). These more conventional initiatives often arise and develop out of faculty needs or requests. For example, in a case study about a journal published by Columbia University’s Center for Digital Research and Scholarship, a research faculty member requested assistance hosting the OA journal he edits, and wanted it to meet the requirements for indexing in PubMed Central (Newton et al., 2014). The library allocated considerable resources to the project, including 1600 staff hours during the launch year alone and $21,147.15 on vendor costs between 2011 and 2014, though this money was recovered through article processing charges. Columbia University’s publishing program centered the needs of the faculty, creating a publishing venture that reflected the goals and mission of its parent institution.

There are certainly more untraditional projects taking place at large research institutions as well, though these also tend to reflect faculty interest. The Purdue University library, collaborating with Purdue Press, has digitized over 1,500 technical reports from the Joint Transportation Research Program — a collaboration between the Indiana Department of Transportation and Purdue’s engineering program — and continues to publish 30 new ones annually, performing many of the review and dissemination activities associated with traditional publishers in order to make available these useful but less conventional and prestigious forms of scholarship (Watkinson, 2014). Still, while the Joint Transportation Research Program creates less formal publication output, it remains firmly grounded in the prestige economy — the project website prominently highlights its October 2017 Seeds for Success Award for research excellence (Joint Transportation Research Program).

In another project, Utah State University (USU) Press and the USU libraries, which have been integrated, have used the school’s institutional repository to both host the press’ backlist OA and to publish new, more unusual monographs. In a 2013 report, librarians involved in the project highlighted three monographs (Wesolek & Spooner). J.M. Bak’s *An introduction to editing manuscripts for medievalists* is a short, 100 page handbook, extremely niche, and non-peer-reviewed, but nevertheless holds immense value to a particular academic community; it has over 1,200 downloads since 2012 (Utah State University). Another book, C.G. Torre’s *The Foundations of Wave Phenomena*, was originally meant to be a normal linear monograph, but was instead published in an interconnected series of chapters that allows for different types of user interaction and flow. The final book, *Latino Voices in the Cache Valley* by R. Williams et al., incorporates essays, videos, and audio to create a true multimedia experience (Wesolek & Spooner, 2013). Despite their innovative nature, all of the monograph titles were originally conceived of as traditional books — albeit OA and hosted online — and developed into their current format over the course of publication, reflecting both librarian involvement and faculty willingness to experiment. These high-intensity projects, along with the extremely labour intensive journal production at Columbia, are made more feasible by the scale of resources available at large university libraries. ARL member libraries often have over a hundred staff members and on average assign 2.4 full-time equivalent staff members to LPS, enabling demanding projects to be undertaken (Spiro, 2015).
However, it is worth noting the fate of the monograph project at USU. No books have been published in the series since the original three in 2012, though there has been significant activity on the repository and many faculty publications are available for download (Utah State University). Watkinson has noted that — as at USU — many initial LPS programs, rooted in large research institutions that adopted scholarly communication projects relatively early, were too ambitious and waned as one-time funding ran out and appetite for intense projects diminished (2014). This is partly a problem with institutional support models: only 15% of schools with LPS have sustainability plans for their LPS programs (Mullins et al., 2012). The demise of some of these projects may also be because publishing at research universities is largely faculty-instigated and driven, in line with their mission. As faculty members complete or lose interest in projects their original initiatives often dwindle and disappear, with library staff unable to sustain them single-handedly. This may be due to an inability or lack of resources on the part of librarians to procure similar or similar-quality content with which to continue a project, or, as Watkinson suggests, because there was decreased interest from librarians after the realization that projects had failed to challenge or meaningfully disrupt the traditional academic publishing model (2014).

LPS at large research universities reflect librarians’ values with hearty commitments to OA materials and the creation and provision of access to innovative material. Nevertheless, these publishing services do exist within a prestige economy where faculty are preeminent and their needs may have a serious impact on the direction in which library publishing goes. Research university LPS are widely seen as having much to offer to academia, producing exciting and important scholarly materials both within and outside the formal paradigms that have framed scholarly communication for so long. Conversely, the contributions of SALs are often overlooked, perhaps because of a belief that serious research does not occur at their parent institutions. Graves (2013) has asserted that despite the perception in the scholarly communications community that colleges and smaller universities exist only to teach, this is simply untrue. Faculty at smaller teaching-oriented institutions also value tenure highly, and see tenure as wrapped up in the scholarly publishing process. In a 2014 survey of faculty at institutions in the Oberlin Group, an affiliation of 80 libraries at selective small liberal arts colleges in the United States, 90% said that publications were important in tenure decisions; when asked why they publish books, the top three motivations were to develop research, to communicate with other specialists in the field, and for tenure or promotion, despite the fact that the survey included faculty who already had tenure (Kenneway, 2014a). A full 70% of respondents thought publisher prestige was one of the most important criteria for choosing a publisher, and almost half thought it was the single most important reason to publish with a certain publisher (Kenneway, 2014a). Innovative formats and open access were generally considered only of middling importance when selecting a publisher. In a comparison survey with non-Oberlin Group faculty, Kenneway found that the non-Oberlin Group faculty — most of whom were at large research institutions — were slightly more concerned with tenure and promotion, but that their primary publishing motivations were the same (2014b). Research and publication are
clearly important to faculty even at non-research oriented institutions.

However, while the faculty attitudes towards scholarship and scholarly communication are similar amongst research and non-research oriented schools, institutional missions varied dramatically: Oberlin College’s mission statement is to “educate students for lives of intellectual, musical, and artistic rigor and breadth; sustained inquiry, creativity and innovation; and leadership,” Middlebury College promises to “challenge students to participate fully in a vibrant and diverse academic community,” and Claremont McKenna College seeks to “educate its students for thoughtful and productive lives and responsible leadership in business, government, and the professions, and to support faculty and student scholarship that contribute to intellectual vitality and the understanding of public policy issues” (Oberlin College; Middlebury College; Claremont McKenna College). The orientation of these smaller schools’ missions is quite different from those at Washington University in St. Louis and UC Davis — students are centered, both in terms of their learning and their engagement with the larger world. As with large research institutions, these commitments influence the types of LPS in which their libraries engage.

Given their smaller size and accordingly fewer resources, SALs’ publishing programs are often less ambitious than their counterparts at research institutions. Small liberal arts colleges in the Mullins et al study employed 19-43 library staff, markedly fewer than at the larger schools; SAL schools with LPS assigned .9 full-time equivalent staff on average to these endeavours, a little over a third of the average staffing resources at research-oriented schools (2012). Still, considering their significantly smaller budgets and staffing models, many SALs have created important and exciting LPS that, reflecting their missions, center on students. Illinois Wesleyan University started hosting undergraduate journals soon after its institutional repository launched (Graves, 2015). Its flagship journal, the peer-reviewed Undergraduate Economic Review, receives submissions from across the globe, is fully student-run, and has only a 25% acceptance rate. Illinois Wesleyan now publishes 7 student journals and is considering offering to host faculty journals as well, a stark reversal of priorities from the research institutions discussed above. Hamilton College launched Couper Press in 2006 specifically to work with the library’s special collections, with a particular focus on the field of communal studies (Graves, 2015). It publishes a peer-reviewed journal and two to four monographs per year, all in print. By focusing on a very niche area, drawing on the institution’s own resources, and building a particular audience in the communal studies field, Couper Press has continued to flourish for over a decade. The project was spearheaded by Randall Ericson, the Special Collections librarian and publishes knowledge for knowledge’s sake in a small niche area rather than as a vehicle for faculty research, reflecting both the college’s and the library’s values.

Other, more ambitious publishing programs do exist in SALs. Perhaps the most visionary is the Oberlin Group’s collaboration on Lever Press, which actively aims to disrupt current publishing models. It sees monographs as “too dense and specialist—more about tenure and promotion for the author than accessibility and usefulness for the reader,” and plans to publish short, more digestible monographs
This choice of format is a radical departure from traditional publishing paradigms, as are its editorial choices: it will especially focus on interdisciplinary works and works co-authored by faculty and undergraduates, hopes to publish an increasing number of “innovative works” every year, and will align its editorial program with collaborating colleges’ missions and values (Lever Press, 2016). The well-regarded Michigan Publishing and the more recently established Amherst College Publishing will host the books on Michigan’s Fulcrum platform, and all material will be OA. Buy-in and funding from over forty schools makes it less likely to fade out of existence like the early ambitious LPS at research institutions, and it will be interesting to see if this mission-aligned, value-driven project succeeds in its goals of shifting the scholarly communications landscape.

SALs have completely driven this project, with some institutional support and faculty input but not impetus. Rather than buying into the prestige economy like LPS at research institutions, or the market economy where traditional academic presses are situated, it operates in the subsidy economy. Contributing libraries will allocate a certain proportion of their annual acquisitions budget so as to cover publishing costs without requiring either financial commitments from authors or payment from users, which Lever Press refers to as paying “in the middle” (Lever Press, 2017). Success will be measured not in financial success or awards and accolades, but by sustainability, positive impact on the scholarly publishing field, and user engagement. The entire structure of Lever Press, from its collaboration to its funding program, evokes the values of SAL institutions.

Librarianship is a value-driven profession, and these commitments carry over into emerging LPS programs at academic institutions. OA is especially well-integrated into most LPS output, and many initiatives explicitly cite their interest in impacting the scholarly communication landscape as one of their goals. LPS are often associated with large research universities, where they operate in a prestige economy, largely faculty-driven and in alignment with research-oriented institutional values. These LPS range from fairly traditional to more creative and inventive projects. However, being faculty-driven has some drawbacks, notably the risk that projects will expire when faculty interest does. SALs, frequently overlooked as a source of academic publishing, have also undertaken several LPS projects. Operating more in a subsidy economy despite similar faculty interest in research and concerns about prestigious publishing opportunities, these projects tend to be librarian-driven and align with the culture of these smaller, student-centered institutions. As with research institutions, SALs’ LPS initiatives range from conventional to innovative. LPS hosted at both types of institution have much to offer to the field of scholarly communication; given the growth and innovation shown over the past few decades, there is real potential for these experiments and contributions to lead to lasting and meaningful change in academic publishing.
References


