University presses and the impact of COVID-19

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Abstract

University presses occupy a distinctive field of publishing, heavily tied to the fortunes of the universities and colleges in which they are usually situated. COVID-19 has catalysed their adoption of digital technologies; focused their commitments to social justice; and given new impetus to business models and formats that fully leverage the Internet, especially open access. Economic pressures on higher education that seem set only to increase are also driving university presses to more interdependent approaches and an emphasis on the contributions of the university press network to knowledge infrastructure for the humanities and social sciences. This article explores how university presses have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular reference to the experiences of the University of Michigan Press. It concludes that the diversity of types of university presses is one of the greatest strengths of this field of publishing and makes it resilient in a time of unprecedented change.

Keywords: COVID-19, university press, academic books, open access, diversity, library market, monograph

INTRODUCTION

While university presses are as diverse as the institutions in which they are usually housed, their experiences so far during a pandemic still far from over have generally been driven by three overlapping forces. These are: (1) the rapid move of research and teaching online due to restrictions on the physical movement of faculty and students, (2) multifaceted financial pressures on the higher education institutions of which they are a part, and (3) a mass social movement towards creating a more equitable and anti-racist society. The implications of these three drivers of change are explored further in this article.

There have been many articles over the years about the tensions between tradition and innovation inherent in university press publishing, and these often remark on the slower pace of change in university press publishing compared to commercial academic publishing (Mudditt, 2016, p. 331). However, the overlapping forces at work during this moment seem to be such that a ‘punctuated’ rather than ‘gradual’ evolutionary change may be underway (Armato, 2012). There is an intentionality and momentum that feels different from what has come before, not least because the parent institutions that have (albeit sometimes grudgingly) almost always supported their own presses in a downturn are themselves under, in some cases, an existential economic threat.

University presses are scattered across the world and include both long-established and new publishing operations, book and journal publication programmes, and restricted access and open-access business models (Cond & Speicher, 2018). UPs are a diverse group but are united by their embeddedness in higher education institutions, a strong focus on editorial selection and development, and a non-profit business model that emphasizes accomplishing mission over financial return for shareholders (Conrad & Crewe, 2020). University of Michigan Press (UMP) is a mid-sized US example with a programme focused on book publishing in the humanities and social sciences. While this article references experiences from other international contexts, it is slanted towards the USA and the experiences of US institutions. As the director of UMP, embedded in the university press ‘publishing field’, the observations of this article bring with them all the bias of my positionality at a particular time in history. While I have attempted to reference as fully as possible, my sources are...
generally from Zoom-enabled conversations, participation in listservs, Twitter exchanges, and the other technology-filtered inputs through which the inhabitants of 2020 have endeavoured to make sense of our socially distanced times.

While around 30% of North American presses now report to libraries, UMP is distinguished by the degree of its integration with the University of Michigan Library (Watkinson, 2016). It lives within the publishing division of the Library (www. publishing.umich.edu) alongside Michigan Publishing Services (a library publishing operation, advancing the Library’s mission through the hosting of journals and digital book collections) and the Deep Blue institutional repository and research data services unit. Except for ‘global presses’ such as Oxford and Cambridge, university presses are generally small publishers (Johnson, Watkinson, & Mabe, 2018, p. 44; Schonfeld, 2016). Michigan produces about 100 books a year. The majority are specialist monographs, with a much lower number of true textbooks (mostly in English Language Teaching) and regional trade titles (focused on the Great Lakes region). With an annual revenue of around US$3 million a year, it is considered one of the larger US presses, but it is definitely in the long tail of publishers worldwide. Its book output and revenue represent less than 5% of that of Oxford University Press (the world’s largest university press), and most university presses are smaller still (‘Oxford University Press Annual Report 2020: Academic Highlights’, 2020; Esposito & Barch, 2017). While the numbers are very ‘back of the envelope’, the combined annual monographic output of all university presses may represent only around 20% of the 86,000 monographs that Digital Science has estimated are published worldwide in all languages, with Europe- and UK-based commercial publishers increasingly dominating in terms of volume (Grimme, Holland, Potter, Taylor, & Watkinson, 2019).

Despite its modest income, UMP’s placement within a large research library provides an outsized ability to leverage technology infrastructure, HR expertise, and scholarly communications services (e.g. copyright advice, research data management, podcast production, digital preservation, metadata enrichment, accessibility remediation). The library context also connects the Press to the related fields of library-based publishing and research data/repository services. These connections drive a focus on exploring new forms of data-rich publication (e.g. through its multimedia Fulcrum publishing platform [www.fulcrum.org]) and a particular interest in maximizing access to scholarly information through open-access approaches (Raughley, 2020).

RESEARCH AND TEACHING MOVING ONLINE

While the dates varied by state, mid-March 2020 saw most higher education institutions in the USA move to remote education (Carey, 2020). Libraries closed their physical facilities, students returned to their homes where possible, and bookstores shuttered their retail spaces. The printers, distributors, and warehouses on which presses rely were generally classified as ‘essential businesses’ and allowed to stay open. The Chicago Distribution Center (CDC), which warehouses and distributes over 100 non-profit publishers’ titles, including those of Michigan, was forced to shut down by a state-wide executive order for 2 weeks in late March and early April. Through the strenuous efforts of its management team and staff, CDC managed to operate consistently and safely throughout the rest of 2020.

In Books in the Digital Age, John Thompson notes that advances in digital printing and distribution technologies have so far had much more impact on academic book publishing than the opportunities for innovation in ebooks, referring to these profound changes in process as a ‘hidden revolution’ (Thompson, 2005, p. 404). Investment in digital printing has undoubtedly provided a substantial return during the pandemic. At the start of 2020, most university presses still made around 85% of their revenue from print sales (Wulf, 2019a). The ability to move source files between a resilient network of printing locations allowed presses that had invested in warehousing digital assets, as well as printed books, to continue supplying customers through channels like Amazon.com, which remained open for business. The importance of Bibliovault at Chicago (www. bibliovault.org) and Ingram Coresource (https://coresource. Ingramcontent.com/), the digital asset management and distribution operations that serve most university presses, has become very clear. As initial print sales for monographs dwindle to around 200 copies on average, a short digital print-run followed by low-volume auto-replenishment or, when possible, true print-on-

Key points

- The COVID-19 pandemic will test the resilience of university press publishers because it is posing unprecedented pressures on their parent institutions, as well as affecting key markets for sales.
- Presses that have invested in digital technologies are recognizing the value of short-run digital printing and ebook distribution.
- Positive reactions to the temporary free-to-read programmes that many university presses put in place early in the pandemic have increased interest in sustainable open-access approaches among participating presses.
- Economic pressures have led to an increasing emphasis on the interdependent way in which the network of university presses provides vital infrastructure for humanities research.
- Differentiating concepts such as ‘mission-driven’ and ‘values-based’ are becoming more clearly articulated.
- University-based publishers have become energized by the opportunity to openly advance anti-racism and promote equity, justice, and inclusion.
demand has become the norm for most monograph publishers. Working out how to make these approaches economically viable for trade and textbook titles (distinguished by their use of colour and distinctive formats) has become a priority as presses also examine their backlists for opportunities to scan and convert even more titles to digital readiness. When their on-campus warehouse was closed, Duke University Press moved over 2,000 titles to a print-on-demand programme and integrated their order entry and fulfilment system to drop-ship orders directly from the printer (Hansen, 2020). When their warehouse was closed for a short period, the CDC team was able to switch titles printing in-house to remote fulfilment over a weekend.

Ebooks have historically remained a surprisingly small part of the revenue picture for most American publishers; only 12% of revenue in 2019 (Wulf, 2019a). While the impact of the move to remote learning and teaching on the ebook market may be delayed as library budgets contract, it is clear that there will be a substantial boost to ebook circulation and use going forward. Because Amazon is the dominant player in the USA for individual book purchasers and was able to keep print books in stock, the shift to ebook purchasing in that sector was not particularly marked. However, the impact of COVID-19 on the preferred format for library purchasing may be transformative. ‘E-preferred’ programmes have been growing slowly for years and now look set to become the norm. While a few US presses such as Duke, MIT, Johns Hopkins, and Michigan have launched their own collections for libraries (as well as several UK presses, such as Manchester and Liverpool in addition to Oxford and Cambridge), most university presses rely on aggregators such as ProQuest, EBSCO, JSTOR, Project Muse, and OverDrive to distribute their ebooks (Pool, 2019). Revenues from these vendors remained stable and seemed set to grow, especially for those vendors with the most comprehensive spread of titles. Anecdotally, it seems that some libraries may be switching funds from continuations (e.g. journal, database) purchasing to acquire one-time collections of ebooks to support online research and teaching. Money to fund ebook purchases would previously have been at the expense of print book acquisitions, with overall negative effects for book publishers (Daniel, Esposito, & Schönfeld, 2019).

While the future promises more ebook sales, the availability of digitized versions of print books through the HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access Service (ETAS) and the Internet Archive National Emergency Library became the dominant form of access for students and faculty without access to print collections during the spring and summer. Because the HathiTrust ETAS (headquartered at the University of Michigan) was careful to observe restrictions in circulation based on established copyright and case law (e.g. only providing access to books already in a library’s print collection), university presses were generally supportive of its activities. HathiTrust’s approach was in marked contrast with the more buccaneering approach of the Internet Archive, whose looser restrictions and broader interpretations of the law have led the National Emergency Library into the courts (T. B. Lee, 2020; Romano, 2020). The different governance mechanisms also affected trust levels, with HathiTrust governed by its large membership of academic libraries and the Internet Archive managed as a Silicon Valley non-profit founded by an individual entrepreneur, Brewster Kahle. How long can the state of emergency be considered to persist will be a challenging question for library members of HathiTrust.

In addition to faculty and students, university press staff also moved to remote working in mid-March, and most remained either entirely remote or only occasionally in campus buildings by the end of the summer. Not only has this change driven the last vestiges of a paper-based workflow out of the system, but it has revealed substantial gaps in knowledge management systems and inconsistency in the use of communication tools. Incomplete digitization of contracts and the lack of a unified project management tool tailored to remote working have caused some stress at the UMP. An internal survey in June 2020 revealed that about a third of the staff used Google Chat for speedy communication, a third used Slack, and a third used e-mail. While almost 85% of the staff members liked working remotely, they missed their colleagues, struggled with care responsibilities and shared space, found their Internet connections to be substandard, and disliked the blurred lines between work and home life. As press directors explore opportunities for remote working over the longer term (saving on overheads, especially in expensive cities), there will be a need for further investment in systems and norms.

ECONOMIC CONTRACTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The outspoken New York University business professor Scott Galloway has predicted a whittling of the USA’s higher education landscape over the next few years, with many universities and colleges struggling, consolidating, and closing (Galloway, 2020). University presses are, among publishers, uniquely embedded in their parent institutions, and all receive financial and/or in-kind support. UMP, for example, depends on an annual $600,000 contribution from the Provost’s Office (about 20% of its yearly revenue) for its operation, as well as in-kind support from the Library, including rent-free building space. While the percentage of institutional support varies from press to press, Michigan is not unusual. Some 80% of members of the Association of University Presses receive support from their affiliated institutions, which on average account for roughly 15% of their total budget (Somin, 2019). The downturn in sales from cash-strapped libraries and students during the first half of 2020 impacted revenue for university presses less than many feared. However, the prospect of substantial cutbacks in any spending that could be viewed as discretionary for a university under pressure from reduced tuition revenue, lack of international students, cuts in government funding, and the increased costs of COVID-19 countermeasures fills many presses with dread. Research universities dependent on public funding, income from elective procedures at their health systems, tuition payments from on-campus (and especially
international) students, and revenue from high-profile athletics seem set to come under particular pressure, and these institutions are the homes of most university presses (Edelman, 2020).

During the autumn of 2020, the Association of University Presses helpfully increased the frequency of collective financial reporting for its members from quarterly to monthly. What the market data revealed most clearly was the variety of different product strategies. For example, smaller university presses often have large regional lists, selling books primarily aimed at individual readers, and these publishers saw fairly stable sales. While Amazon’s direct-to-consumer power has continued to grow, many independent bookstores have reacted imaginatively to store closures. By offering curb-side pickup and online affiliate programmes in partnership with the upstart bookshop.org, they ensured that readers stuck at home could still purchase regional natural history books or titles by local authors (Alter, 2020). On the other hand, university presses reliant on higher education textbook sales were affected by the uncertainty of student enrolments, especially if their titles were not in ebook form, and presses dependent on the library market saw the most challenges as institutional budgets were frozen, pending declines. For university presses with journal lists, the pain of these cuts has been deferred until 2021 because subscriptions were budgeted for prior to the pandemic shutdowns in the spring. However, monograph publishers immediately started to see dramatic declines in print purchasing and meagre compensation from ebook sales, with every sign starting in the spring that library spending will decline still more (McKenzie, 2020). The longer-term implications of this decline in spending for university presses will depend on the choices that individual libraries make. Not buying monographs or independent journals in the humanities is much more palatable on many campuses than not renewing large commercial journal or ebook packages, especially in medicine or the sciences.

Many librarians have been publicly supportive of values-based approaches that preserve ‘bibliodiversity’, characterized by a market in which smaller publishers who are close to their individual disciplinary or language communities prosper (Shearer, Chan, Kuchma, & Mounier, 2020; Toledo, Kulczycki, Pölönen, & Sivertsen, 2019). Whether libraries’ constrained funding choices can align with this advocacy is still to be seen. If not, university presses with a commitment to monograph publishing will likely continue to be the worst hit by library retrenchment, as will discretionary spending on activities such as open-access support.

University presses were typically founded as vehicles for publishing their parent institutions’ work. UMP, for example, was created in 1930 ‘because of the multiplication of departmental publications’ and the ‘great need for better organization of our publishing activities’ in the words of the University President of the time, Alexander Ruthven (Shaw, 1958, p. 1416). Today, however, university presses focus on their disciplinary more than institutional communities - leaving space for the growth of library-based publishing (Lippincott, 2016, p. 187). Except for the largest examples, which cover a broad range of disciplines, most university presses are well known for publishing in a restricted number of subject areas. In 2019, for example, Michigan acquisitions editors attended conferences in political science, American studies, classical studies, music, theatre, African studies, and Asian studies (as well as English Language Teaching and local history). Such a disciplinary focus is costly as it necessitates a lot of travel and expensive book exhibits. With travel bans in place, the reduction in acquisitions costs was substantial, and these reduced costs helped some presses end their 2020 financial year in much better shape than expected (also supported by a positive first 8 months pre-pandemic in financial years that generally run July through June) (Brown, 2020a).

On the other hand, the cancellation of money-making events was lousy news for the learned societies that often host academic conferences with large book exhibits and also made many acquisitions editors worry about whether they could maintain their networks through virtual means alone (Kwon, 2020). It has also challenged marketing departments to rapidly reinvent their online promotion strategies, with a strong focus on electronic review copies and virtual exhibits. Between June and August, the UMP, for example, organized a series of Live Author Talks on Zoom. These provided an exciting opportunity to ‘meet’ authors who most staff only interact with by e-mail, and the recordings provide valuable collateral for the future, but they were extremely labour-intensive to organize. Over the autumn, a series of podcast interviews with authors focused on political matters around the time of the US presidential election proved less time-consuming, but finding the right balance between investment and return in a virtual environment remains a work in progress.

The narrow disciplinary focus of most university presses and their geographical dispersal around the world has led to an increased interest in the concepts of interdependence and ‘knowledge infrastructures’ within the scholarly communication community (Edwards et al., 2013). This work exists in the context of major library interest in providing academy-owned infrastructure in the face of what commentators see as increasing monopolization by commercial interests (Aspesi & Brand, 2020; Lewis, Goetsch, Graves, & Roy, 2018). As Amy Brand, the director of MIT Press, has noted, university presses have been rather absent from the broader movement. Their focus has been on a narrower question rather than large-scale advocacy; rather than developing vertical silos at each institution, can backend operations in particular be shared to get economies of scale? In the UK and Europe, the COPIM (www.copim.ac.uk/) and OPERAS (https://operas.hypotheses.org/) projects are building shared open-source infrastructure for mission-driven academic publishing. In the USA, the University of North Carolina Press has expanded its Longleaf operation from providing exclusively physical distribution to become a hub for a community of presses interested in joint production, marketing, rights representation, and other services (https://longleafservices.org/). In the digital space, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and other private funders have supported the development of open-source publishing platforms in the USA and UK over the last few years. Several of these have been particularly well used by publishers interested in making their publications freely available in general, or with a particular focus on pandemic-related knowledge. These include PubPub from the
MIT Knowledge Futures Group and Manifold from the University of Minnesota Press and the City University of New York (Berkery, Windhorn, & Lawlor, 2019; Maxwell, Bordini, & Shamash, 2017). The Next Generation Library Publishing project is one of several initiatives aimed at linking such tools together (https://educopia.org/next-generation-library-publishing/).

Quite apart from further revealing the financial benefits of shared services during an economic downturn, COVID-19 has focused attention on both the necessity and fragility of infrastructure in general, from delivery networks to online meetings. As presses individually feel exposed to their host institutions’ uncertain fortunes, there has been a growing interest in the role that the system of presses, each with their own disciplinary focuses, plays in supporting a robust infrastructure for humanities and social sciences scholarship. In this framing, the closing of one press could have a disproportionate impact on the integrity of the whole fabric and substantially disrupt scholars’ careers in particular disciplines. More prosaically, the successful closing of one university press could draw unwelcome attention from administrators to institutional investments that are not solely directed to the local benefit of the university’s students or faculty. When so many other threats are present in their environment, will faculty members have the bandwidth to protest at the press’s closing or reduction in operations with the vehemence that they had shown in previous instances when presses such as Stanford or Missouri appeared to be under attack? (Eligon, 2012; Wulf, 2019b).

While university presses did not report much reduction in author submissions during 2020 (in fact, many manuscripts arrived sooner than anticipated as authors focused their home-bound attention on writing), another looming threat from an economic contraction in higher education lies in the increasingly precarious nature of academic employment (Brown, 2020a). The portion of faculty members on the tenure track has been decreasing for many years, from about 45% in 1976 to about 25% today according to the American Association of University Professors and likely even more (Childress, 2019, pp. 22–23). Many commentators fear that the economic crisis will leave many faculty members unemployed or employed solely as adjuncts with heavy teaching loads (Sommers, Blyth, Galbraith, & Sosa, 2020). The removal of the incentives for long-form publishing that the promise of tenure provided and sheer lack of time for writing may mean a dwindling supply of the high-quality manuscripts on which university presses depend. The implications of these trends for the diversity of authorial voices who have the space to write books and how university presses should rethink the value that they offer their authors are the focus of the next section.

ANTI-RACISM, DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

The deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor in spring 2020 spurred an international focus on the persistence of racism. In the USA, the disproportionate COVID-19 mortality rate in majority-black cities such as Detroit highlighted the structural disadvantages that African Americans continue to endure (Altman, 2020). The flood of books about anti-racism and white supremacy may see sales decline as the news cycle moves on. Still, many higher education institutions have promised to make structural changes that will have long-lasting impacts. University presses have sought to contribute to these initiatives with notable initiatives that move towards inclusive scholarly publishing (Coggins, Fosado, Henry, & Manaktala, 2020). At UMP, as at many others, acquisitions editors have committed to amplify the voices of people of colour, re-examine the composition of editorial boards, and be intentional in selecting more diverse peer reviewers. Production departments have heightened their focus on eradicating racist language from manuscripts and re-examining the diversity of their suppliers. Sales and marketing teams have expanded the range of review venues they submit books to, directed promotional funding to Black-owned bookshops, and diversified their advertising spends. Across the landscape, presses are scrutinizing their hiring practices and examining their organizational climates to try and ensure that black, indigenous, and people of colour they recruit into a majority-white industry can also be retained. The Toolkits for Equity project, involving many volunteers from the AUPresses community, published its first resource, the ‘Antiracism Toolkit for Allies’, in August 2020 aimed at providing practical support for the scholarly publishing community (https://c4disc.org/toolkits-for-equity/).

These moves are not unique to university presses, and many of the leading publishers in addressing the industry’s inequities are commercial. For example, P. Lee and Low Books, which has created the most authoritative survey of diversity within the US publishing industry (the Diversity Baseline Survey), is a for-profit children’s publisher. Their 2019 update of a study initiated in 2015 received responses from almost 153 companies, including the Big Five commercial publishers; 47 trade publishers; and 35 university presses. It revealed an industry that was 76% white, 74% cis women, 81% straight, and 89% non-disabled, with these figures little changed from 4 years before (P. Lee & Low, 2020). On the other hand, university presses are integrated into higher education institutions that are now under increasing scrutiny from their students. These are post-millennials whose views on the importance of equity, justice, and inclusion are generally much more progressive than society as a whole. Their influence may mean that the commitment to change remains more long-lasting in the university press world (Fry & Parker, 2018).

In general, university presses have become much more conscious of their identity as ‘mission-driven’, ‘non-profit’ publishers and what those designations might mean in practice. This sharpening has been driven by the rise of commercial publishing activity in humanities book publishing on the one hand and the activism of independent open-access publishers such as Punctum Books and Open Book Publishers under the banner of the ScholarLed consortium (www.scholarled.org). Being stuck in the middle is never a good thing for a brand, and university presses have had to sharpen their sense of identity. Vague references to ‘values’ have given way to a more in-depth assessment of concepts such as...
In addition to increasing their focus on anti-racism, university presses took the lead in opening access to scholarly content during the pandemic’s early phases. Some made only collections relevant to the pandemic freely available, while others made much more content free, albeit for a limited period. An initiative by Project MUSE was particularly notable for its size and level of participation, with close to 25,000 books and over 300 journals made freely available by 80 publishers between mid-March and the end of June 2020 (‘Free Resources on MUSE During COVID-19’, 2020). These programmes have come in for criticism by librarians pointing out that the challenges of access hardly disappeared in July (when most initiatives expired) and open-access advocates who view them primarily as fishing expeditions, looking to build data on use that could later be leveraged to support sales targeting. Both criticisms are warranted, especially when programmes required registration to participate or advertised free trial access.

Irrespective of motivations, these programmes did see substantial usage. MIT Press, for example, reported a 20-fold increase in monthly usage compared to pre-pandemic levels. By providing institutional free trial access to the almost 3,000 ebooks on MIT Press Direct through the end of the academic year, they turned what had previously been a handful of trial requests a month for their ebook collection into 800 in 6 weeks (Hansen, 2020). The UMP also saw substantial increases in usage when it made the 1,500 titles in its UMP Ebook Collection (www.fulcrum.org/michigan) free to read but not download between March 20 and the end of August. While UMP did not require IP registration, it encouraged librarians to sign up for updates and surveyed users and authors; 97% of its authors were supportive of the initiative, with many leaving warm messages of endorsement (Watkinson, 2020a). Analysis of web logs by the IP registry revealed that 85% of use came from outside institutional authentication ranges, with almost 60% of individual use coming from outside the USA – a reversal of sales patterns that suggests untapped global interest in UMP titles (Watkinson, 2020b). Meanwhile, Johns Hopkins University Press made 1,500 titles (monographs, professional, reference, and academic trade in a range of subject categories) free on Project MUSE between March 18 and the end of July. They not only reported a substantial increase in engagement but also little overall effect on sales, with some subject areas even seeing sales boosts when compared to similar titles that were not included in the ‘free online’ promotion (Pope, 2020).

As these experiments continue to be published, it is clear that many university presses have learned interesting information about what happens when they make their titles freely available online. Everyone who shares their results makes it clear that a marketplace so impacted by COVID-19 cannot be considered typical. Still, the practical advantages of open access in terms of market intelligence, author satisfaction, and impact on sales seem sure to drive the continued development of open-access monograph initiatives. The imminence of funder mandates for books as well as journals, especially in the UK and Europe; the increasing availability of funds from government, institutional, and private foundation sources; and improvements in the infrastructures of discovery and usage reporting were already pushing interest in open access among presses (Grimme et al., 2019). The experiences of COVID-19 have heightened faculty and student awareness of the challenges of ebook availability, creating substantial surges in the use of resources that were already open access. With the likelihood of more job losses and a shrunk market for new PhDs, access issues will undoubtedly become even more significant.

More positively, the clear benefits of public access to medical data during the pandemic and a growing familiarity with web-native tools have catalysed experimentation with forms that move beyond the print facsimiles that have passed for ebooks. New formats have proliferated, and some of the newer platforms have benefited. The MIT Press created a PubPub community for COVID-19-related books (https://covid-19.mitpress.mit.edu/); Minnesota delivered a Manifold Scholar collection of anti-racist ebooks free to read online, enriched with video and offering opportunities for collaborative annotation (https://manifold.umn.edu/projects/project-collection/racial-justice); and Michigan made available on Fulcrum a free collection of books, author interviews, and multimedia resources to inform decision-making during the 2020 US Presidential Election (www.publishing.umich.edu/features/reading-the-2020-presidential-election). Even more technically ambitious custom projects funded by grants have been published by University of Virginia Press and Stanford University Press (independently and in collaboration with Brown University Library, https://library.brown.edu/create/digitalpublications/current-projects/). Audio versions of academic books have increased, and primarily oral forms of scholarly communication have started to gain recognition. These include Michigan’s ‘i used to love to dream’, the first peer reviewed rap album published by an academic press, created by A. D. Carson, Assistant Professor of Hip Hop and the Global South at the University of Virginia (https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11738372) (Flaherty, 2020). These initiatives take advantage of the network’s power to link resources, facilitate interaction, and enable granular discovery. The innovation in ebook publishing that seems to have taken so long to arrive seems to have finally been unleashed by the pandemic.

WILL THERE BE A ‘NEW NORMAL’ FOR UNIVERSITY PRESSES?

The idea that the experiences of this multifaceted pandemic will lead the organizations that survive it to establish a ‘new normal’ has already become popular among the consultants who aim to
help them get there. ‘As leadership teams dig into the complex process of recovery, one truth is abundantly clear: We cannot afford to go back to the old way of doing things’, write the experts at Bain & Company with dollars signs in their eyes. ‘The companies that most aggressively adapt and extend new ways of operating will turn this crisis to their advantage’ (Saenz, Anderson, Ledingham, & Supko, 2020). ‘Aggressive adaptation’ may not match the style of university presses, but it at least seems clear that a moment in which some longer-term directions of digitally enabled process change will be consolidated has arrived. ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste’ was the mantra of the Obama White House at the time of the 2008–2009 ‘Second Great Depression’, and university press directors interviewed by Ithaka S&R in June 2020 shared this optimistic sentiment as they looked ahead (Brown, 2020b).

As John Maxwell and his colleagues have pointed out, the depiction of various forms of ‘crisis’ has been a meme in discussions of university presses for several decades (Maxwell et al., 2017). Facing down continual crises has made university presses specialists in resilience. Still, they have always been able ultimately to fall back on the resources of universities and colleges that have supported their persistence. As higher education faces the multifaceted crisis that is COVID-19, the need for flexibility and adaptability within the publishing field most closely tied to its fortunes has never been greater. The diversity of university presses within North America is shaped by the variety of their parent institutions, the cultures of the disciplines they focus on, and the mix of products they produce. For university presses globally, funding environment and linguistic focus create additional layers. Add to this the unpredictability of COVID-19 and the strategies that university presses will adopt may look very different from each other going forward. It seems a lame form of prognostication, but when an unprecedented ‘wicked problem’ like the COVID-19 pandemic faces an entire industry, it is in this diversity of the university press field that its greatest strength lies.

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