Embracing change: The MIT Press and the future of university-based publishing

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Abstract
As a relatively new university press director intent on future-proofing the MIT Press during a time of rapid change, a crucial question for me is how to honor a legacy of excellence in content, design, and production as we move into the future as part of an educational institution committed to experimentation, invention, and open information access. For us, the answer is that we not only embrace it but actively participate in creating and defining that future. This article provides a high-level overview of current strategic priorities and objectives at the MIT Press, focused mainly on the book side of the house.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2010 article in the Journal of Electronic Publishing, the University of Michigan’s Paul Courant, well known for his work in the economics of universities, libraries, and scholarly information, wrote that university presses ‘confer a ‘warm glow’ to the local university in recognition of the service provided to the system of scholarly publication...but it remains perfectly possible for a very good institution to have no press at all. Unlike math and literature departments, locally owned and operated publication entities have never been essential elements of excellent universities’ (Courant, 2010). While this may well be true of individual universities, it most certainly is not true of the aggregate; the ‘system of scholarly publication’ that Courant refers to, and the university presses at the core of that system, remain absolutely essential to academia as we know it.

University presses serve the academic ecosystem in a variety of ways, but perhaps most importantly as a multi-university cooperative for academic peer review and credentialing, particularly for book-centric fields. Collectively, university presses around the world form our largest source of independent, peer reviewed scholarly works. Each year, members of the Association of University Presses publish approximately 15,000 books of scholarly, intellectual, or creative merit (Esposito, 2017). With higher education, science, and the notion of truth itself under attack in many parts of the world today, the university press’ commitment to the integrity of knowledge creation and sharing enterprise has renewed urgency and relevance.

Still, faced with a well-documented decline in monograph sales (Reisz, 2017) in recent decades, the transcendence of the Internet, and scholars’ expectations that book content, like journal content, be enhanced and available for ‘on-time’ research, university presses are compelled to evolve or risk losing much of their relevance. In order for mission-driven publishers to flourish into the future, and to compete effectively with commercial entities on the one hand and the library-as-publisher model on the other, it is imperative that we establish our own innovation pathways and align with the priorities of our host institutions.

Since its founding in 1962, The MIT Press (MITP) has been changing the rules of engagement between academic authors and their readers. The Press’s core mission has long been experimentation in both how and what it publishes as the creator of some of the earliest interactive, open online books and communities; as the publisher of challenging, ground-breaking, meticulously designed books and journals across the arts and sciences; and as a significant force for the recognition of new interdisciplinary fields.

As a relatively new director intent on future-proofing MITP during a time of rapid change, a crucial question for me is how to honour a legacy of excellence in content, design, and production as we move into the future as part of an educational institution committed to experimentation, invention, and open information access. For us, the answer is that we not only embrace it but actively participate in creating and defining that future. Below, I provide a high-level overview of current strategic priorities and objectives at MITP, focused mainly on the book side of the house. Institutional relevance or alignment no doubt takes very
differently for different university-based publishers. Still, I hope readers find sparks of inspiration in what follows.

When I became director of MITP in July of 2015, I gave myself 6 months to produce a 5-year plan to guide decision making and priorities for the next several years. In that 6-month timeframe, I spent as much time as I could getting to know the staff; learning about Press operations in all key areas; and meeting with faculty, institute administrators, Press board members, and other potential partners on the MIT campus. I then worked with my senior team to model long-term business and financial targets that I could share with staff, with MIT’s provost, and with my supervisor, the Director of the MIT Libraries.

The ‘Turnaround Plan’ that resulted focused on the following high-level areas for growth:

- Trade titles for a broader, non-specialist readership interested in science and technology.
- An in-house digital platform for higher margin e-book sales to institutions.
- Author-centric publishing services and other campus partnerships.
- Resource development to support open access (OA) models and ongoing experimentation.

I discuss each area in turn below. Three years in, we have exceeded our projections for financial growth. Many challenges remain as we balance our mission to be a leading publisher of beautifully designed print books and journals in a range of fields with our investments in the digital frontier. By the same proverbial token, exciting new opportunities arise on a daily basis. After all, what a privilege, for all of us in learned publishing, to labour in the sphere of words and ideas!

**OUR TRADE PUBLISHING PROGRAMME**

University presses sometimes risk being criticized for abandoning their mission when they publish books for the general reader (Cohen, 2018). That said, there is a long tradition of university presses that are successfully publishing trade books (Givler, 2002). For many years, MITP’s list in art and architecture was at the heart of our trade programme. Supporting trade promotion and publicity for our list in arts and visual culture, broadly defined, led us to evolve a sizeable marketing and publicity department over the years, providing a strong foundation for growing our trade programme in other areas. Through the lens of institutional alignment, we recently identified new opportunities to increase acquisitions in the fields of physics, math, engineering, design, and digital education, and to shift the balance of our lists more towards trade books in STEM fields.

Crucially, fulfilling this objective does not entail a decrease in our output of professional and course books in our core disciplines, which span linguistics, media, information science, architecture, economics, brain and biological sciences, environmental science, and other fields that align with MIT’s academic emphasis on trans-disciplinary art, science, design, and technology.

Instead, we increased the total output overall, and the bulk of that growth comes from trade titles in the sciences – not dumbed down blockbuster books but books that ‘honor the complexity of their subject matter’, as one of my more eloquent colleagues put it. In the short term, this tactic has had a positive impact on the Press’s bottom line. These are also books that can generate significant publicity and sales and thus help support our mission-driven programme across the board. Perhaps more importantly, however, the trade objective puts us in an even stronger position to contribute to MIT’s mission to bring science and technology to bear in addressing significant challenges in the world. When publishers translate academic and research content for non-specialist readers, it is another way of expanding the access to, and the impact of, that research.

**MITP DIRECT, OUR FORTHCOMING INSTITUTIONAL E-BOOK PLATFORM**

Even as we grow the audiences for MITP books, academic authors and readers are still our bread and butter. It is core to our mission to serve young, up-and-coming scholars, to peer review worthy submissions that come our way, and to find ways to publish highly specialized works with limited audiences. Almost everything we publish today is available in digital form, and much of it is either intentionally OA, or unintentionally so, in the form of unauthorized digital copying, yet we find that individual book buyers still prefer print to digital by a significant (and only slowly diminishing) margin. As documentary film-maker Ken Burns said in his 2015 commencement speech to that year’s graduating class at Washington University in St. Louis, ‘Read. The book is still the greatest man-made machine of all—not the car, not the TV, not the smart phone...’. Enough said.

Compared with individual consumers, the purchasing behaviour of institutional customers today shows a much stronger – and more reliably growing – preference for digital books. Indeed,
the decline in print monograph sales over many years is the direct result of shifting library collection priorities. This was a major factor in our decision to build a platform to insource hosting and sales of our e-books to libraries, following in the footsteps of Duke University Press (see www.dukeupress.edu/Libraries/collectionDetail.php?collectionid=2). A more ‘disintermediated’ approach not only promises to improve our margin on institutional sales of academic e-books, it also affords us more control over our digital future and the ability to provide access to MITP content under terms consistent with our values – for example, using watermarking in lieu of Digital Rights Management in compliance with the Charlotte Initiative key principles (see http://charlotteinitiative.unc.edu/), which also specify permanent acquisitions of e-books, provision of irrevocable perpetual access and archival rights, and allowance for unlimited simultaneous users.

With MITP Direct launching in 2019, we expect to realize our objectives to:

- Capture a larger percentage of revenues from MITP e-book sales for the Press and our authors.
- Provide terms of access that are consistent with our values as a university press.
- Incentivize ourselves to digitize, control, and archive our own book content.
- Curate, package, and distribute our content in ways that better align with the research needs of scholars and the evolving collection development priorities of libraries.
- Build a foundation for experimentation with new functionality and configurable access models.
- Establish direct institutional relationships and utilize analytics to better our publishing programme as a whole.
- More effectively manage and promote the MIT brand and how it is monetized.
- Provide a ready foundation for institutional subvention of OA monographs.

On the last point, I find myself wondering how firm or fuzzy the line between best practice licensing terms for e-books, along the lines of the Charlotte Initiative principles, and institutionally sponsored OA really is. And if the latter is the mode preferred by the community, why have an intermediary aggregator deliver and monetize our content?

PUBLISHING SERVICES AND CAMPUS PARTNERSHIPS

The growth of publishing service offerings from university presses puts us in a better position to meet the publication needs of the faculty and departments on our campuses. How do we leverage the core capabilities of an established publishing house – which include editorial, design, and production; e-book conversion and distribution; marketing and publicity; sales and distribution; order fulfilment, warehousing, and customer service; and tools for inventory management – to provide services to our community and other publishers and create new revenue streams in the process?

Distribution partnerships between publishers are nothing new. Newer for us are the partnerships with other academic publishing units on our campus that had previously sourced publishing services outside of MIT. For example, MIT’s School of Architecture and Planning (SA+P) has a very active publications unit, and SA+P Press in its entirety is now being distributed by MITP for the first time. Other new campus partnerships include books in collaboration with Sloan Management Review and Technology Review and a new imprint called MITxPress, a collaboration with MIT’s Office of Digital Learning, to make available in book form course and lecture materials from MIT’s essential online courses. Outside of MIT, our publishing services have thus far helped launch one new university press, Goldsmiths Press, in 2016, MITP provides marketing, distribution, and production services to Goldsmiths, the UK’s first green OA monograph publisher, combining OA with a fair and varied pricing model for print books.

Publishing services also extend to self-publishing. Thanks to a generous donation to the MIT Libraries in 2015, we were able to purchase an Espresso Book Machine (EBM) for the MITP Bookstore. The EBM is regularly used for custom publishing and self-publishing by MIT departments and individuals, as well as by members of the local community. Other uses include print-on-demand MITP paperback publications; in-store manufacture of select non-MITP in-copyright paperback works; ability to print and sell on request millions of public domain titles available through EspressNet; in-store manufacture of custom course and other materials to serve the MIT community; production of MITP branded blank journals and other stationary items for sale in store; and internal MITP galley and catalogue production.

An investment in publishing services also provides the foundation for a more author-centric and modularized publishing strategy. Imagine the future through a more author-centric lens. Going forward, university-based publishers might provide authors and institutions with a suite of unbundled services to meet their particular needs – whether peer review, editing, production, dissemination, preservation, reputation and impact tracking, marketing, publicity, and so on. If publishing has historically been something of a black box – raw material in through one side, finished work out the other, with sales being the primary source of revenue – one effect of the Internet has been to explode that black box. Unbundled services allow for more fine-grained control over publishing costs and present us with an opportunity to experiment with a range of new business models.

COMMUNITY AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

The focus on creating a community around our publications extends from the physical world – in the form of the MIT Press
Bookstore, with the EBM as well as a very active series of author events at the store and elsewhere in the local area – into the virtual world and our investments in evolving research publishing from a closed, sequential process into more of an open, community-driven one, in partnership with several other presses and organizations. For example, the development of open source alternatives to the stranglehold that a small handful of commercial entities now maintain on not only the markets for information but also on reputation systems, publishing technologies, and digital innovation will be of clear benefit to the research community and mission-driven publishers alike.

The community and resource development function at MITP is new for us. I consider it essential in achieving our objectives to grow our OA publishing activities along with our efforts to push digital boundaries, in alignment with the strengths and priorities of MIT itself. When I became director, the MITP was the largest American UP with no endowment and no dedicated resource development function. We still have no endowment, but our resource development efforts are steadily growing and proving successful. In addition to two recently established gift funds – one to help us continue our legacy of design and production excellence in the areas of art, architecture, and visual culture and the other to support OA and digital innovation – we are partnering with the MIT Media Lab in a new grant-supported initiative called the Publishing Futures Group (or PFG), a test kitchen, incubator, and a staging platform for the development and launch of new publishing technologies and aligned OA publications, staffed jointly by the Press and the Media Lab.

The PFG is currently incubating PubPub, an open authoring and publishing platform initially developed as a Media Lab project. PubPub socializes the process of knowledge creation by integrating conversation, annotation, and versioning into short- and long-form digital publication. Among the books now on PubPub is Frankenbook, an interactive edition of Frankenstein (Guston, Finn, & Robert, 2017). Community-contributed annotations on the platform live alongside multimedia elements and a series of essays, and classrooms and reading groups are encouraged to create their own digital edition to host private discussions and manage assignments. Also on PubPub is the Journal of Design and Science (JoDS, https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/), which forges new connections between science and design and breaks down the barriers between traditional academic disciplines. We envision JoDS as the node in a global network of online debates and intelligent discussion rooted in the Media Lab’s unique research and design ethos.

In the area of OA, other important collaborations include our partnership with the Internet Archive (https://archive.org/details/mitpress), supported by the Arcadia Fund (https://www.arcadia-fund.org.uk/), to scan, preserve, and enable open lending of hundreds of MITP books that are currently not available digitally. This partnership represents an important advance in bringing deep backlist titles across MITP publications in science, technology, art, and architecture to a global online audience. In being the first university press to partner with the Internet Archive in this way, we hope to inspire other university presses to digitize and open backlist and out-of-print works.

When it comes to OA, we strive to strike the right balance among accessibility, quality, and sustainability. We seek to provide the widest possible access to the works we publish while producing meticulously curated, edited, and crafted works for scholars, students, and the educated reading public. We actively support a variety of OA models for digital monographs, trade books, and textbooks, with an emphasis on being author-responsive. Whether or not a book is published OA in digital form has no bearing on how it is curated, peer reviewed, edited, designed, or marketed by the Press. The preferences and priorities of the author are of the utmost importance in determining the right publishing model for a given book, and there are, of course, many factors for authors and publishers to consider. Most of our OA books to date have been supported by sales of the print edition and are not otherwise subsidized. But like many academic publishers today, seeing the market for scholarly monographs contract, we believe that an institutionally subsidized OA model is a less risky and more sustainable way to publish academic monographs.

CONCLUSION

As a university press director – even of a still successful and largely financially self-supporting press – continuing to do exactly what we have always done is not an option, for it would mean a continued slow but certain decline. Not only have the markets changed, but the needs and preferences of our authors have changed as well. The legacy I hope to create as director will future-proof MITP with new sustainability models consistent with our core values of experimentation and openness.

While I feel strongly that our academic institutions should champion and protect their presses, I feel even more strongly that university presses as a group could be doing a better job of controlling the narrative around what we do, how we differ in our motives and values from commercial publishers, who are beholden to shareholders, and how we align with our host institutions.

We can all agree that university presses exist to serve our authors and institutions. I think we also agree that scholarly publishing is critical to the academy’s core mission of creating and disseminating knowledge. As universities begin to assert greater control over scholarly communication, for example, through the stewardship of institutional repositories and OA publishing funds for faculty, I believe that university presses must build stronger partnerships on their campuses and make an even stronger commitment to embracing change.

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