The Futures of Scholarly Publishing[1]

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'When people expect to get something for nothing, they are sure to be cheated.'

– P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*

I will return to that quote from P.T. Barnum later in this paper. To begin, however, I'd like to thank ACLS for organizing this panel on 'Crises and Opportunities: The Future(s) of Scholarly Publishing.' Those multiple plurals – the emphasis on crises *and* opportunities, and that injunction to imagine our 'futures' – signal that we are finally beyond the panic response to '*the* crisis in scholarly publishing.' Not that the crisis is over. If anything, it has intensified. However, we now know more than we did in the past, there is less hysteria, and we have an opportunity to make some decisions that could reshape, and potentially save, the best aspects of academic publishing – which means the best academic research.

A key feature of academic publishing is that it touches on so many aspects of our academic lives, since it is the chief evaluating and credentialing mechanism upon which the reward system of academe is based. University press publishing has many portals, and, as individuals, we enter variously as students, scholars, teachers, mentors, editors, and administrators. Institutionally, we also have different relationships to scholarly publishing – as professional organizations, private universities, public universities, libraries, electronic publish-

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ers, and a range of different presses. It is important to have all of these – individually and institutionally – represented in our discussion because this forecloses the possibility of thinking there is some utopian 'elsewhere' where there *is* no problem. There is a problem, and we are all part of it. Kate Torrey, Director of the University of North Carolina Press, likes to say, 'we all breathe the same air.' The 'we' in that sentence is not just those in the world of university press publishing but all of us who, in multiple ways, have been rewarded in our professional lives because of work that has been supported by underpaid, understaffed, and overworked scholarly publishers. If we are part of the problem, we all must collectively, and more equitably, contribute to the solution.

At the risk of belabouring the obvious, I am going to linger on this notion of collective responsibility, inclusive decision making, and profession-wide resolutions. I believe we are at a turning point where many of us want to find systemic and strategic solutions and move beyond hand-wringing, finger-pointing, and blame-pinning. Pinning the blame is a shell game that constantly diverts our attention from the ever-travelling pea, leaving us baffled, guessing, and typically looking in one place when the 'real problem' resides elsewhere.

A sampling of the essays written on this topic over the last three or four years makes it abundantly clear that we do not need more diagnoses of the problem. We've had plenty of those. The problem is that we have tied tenure to the publication of a scholarly book. No, others say: uncoupling tenure from books cannot solve the problem because journals are in trouble, too. Others suggest that the problem is the scholarly monograph itself, or that the problem is curtailed library spending on humanities books. The problem is price-gouging by commercial publishers of science journals, forcing libraries to spend less money on humanities and social science publications. The problem is chain bookstores, the dwindling number of independent bookstores, and the increasing conservatism of those that remain. The problem is electronic booksellers like Amazon.com, with their heavy discounting and selling of used books. The problem is that books cost too much to produce. The problem is that electronic publishing is too expensive and doesn't work for monographs. The problem is shrinking subsidies to presses in the wake of cutbacks to higher education for state universities. The problem is shrinking subsidies to presses in light of dwindling returns on endowments and diminished philanthropy at private

universities. The problem is that many universities that depend upon academic publications (books or journal articles) to award tenure don't have presses of their own – they are 'mooching off' everyone else. The problem is the corporatizing of the university. The problem is the sciences. The problem is the changing demographics of higher education: there are fewer assistant professors and graduate students, who are the primary book buyers (as well as the primary authors of articles in refereed journals). The problem is that the course pack has been substituted for the assigned secondary classroom text. The problem is that the jargon of postmodern critical theory has shrunk the audience for the humanities. The problem is that the critical theory boom has ended, and no one is excitedly reading every new book any more. The problem is that, since 9/11, people are watching CNN and not buying books, trade or academic. The problem is that university press books are underpriced relative to their production costs. The problem is that university press books cost too much relative to the income of their target audience. The problem is too many books. The problem is too few books. The problem is too many books of one kind and too few of another. The problem is that students don't know how to read any more.

The problem is that almost all of the above are *part* of the problem. Fixating on parts means that we never arrive at an overarching solution.

Furthermore, while those are some of the shifting problems, even the victims change in other arguments: It's the humanities. It's the humanities and the book-oriented social science fields. It's junior professors in literature. It's junior professors in foreign literatures or working on pre-modern topics. It's junior professors at non-elite institutions in foreign literatures who work on pre-modern topics.... Or maybe it's just the French!

If the insights of today's panel are to amount to anything, we must stop thinking of these problems and the sufferers as ever and always elsewhere. After all, these are the most basic aspects of scholarship, the foundation of our profession. The bottom line is that scholarly publishing isn't financially feasible as a business model – never was, never was intended to be, and should not be. *If scholarship paid, we wouldn't need university presses.*

Members of this panel have been asked to re-evaluate big issues such as the reward structures of our profession in light of new tech-

nologies, collaborative models of authorship, non-print forms of publication, and so forth. All of these are vitally important. My reservation about having such a discussion, however, is the timing. I am not in favour of uncoupling book publishing from tenure. But I do want to uncouple discussions of re-evaluating tenure requirements from the current economic crisis in publishing. A university press book and several refereed articles have been the price of admission to tenure for a good four decades. It is impossible to change overnight the standard of excellence in a profession as hierarchical and decentralized as ours. But we need to stabilize the losses in the publishing business now. Separately, without the sense of economic ruin so near, we can engage in serious conversations about what kind of profession we want. Coupling an economic exigency with a philosophical reassessment is the proverbial apples and oranges, and it will lead to bad business decisions and inequitable professional fixes.

* * *

In the remainder of this paper, I am going to propose a number of ways in which the current costs of publishing can be distributed more equitably. Before I do, however, I want to make two personal declarations. The first has to do with being vice provost at a research university. When you are part of the provost's office, which oversees not only all the costs of doing academic business but also the tenure process, it is impossible not to see to what degree the fates of publishing, libraries, and scholarship are intertwined. A provost trying to save money by asking her university press to bring in more revenue (making cost a major goal in book acquisition) is in an untenable position if she is also trying to maintain the same quality-based publishing standards for her faculty. At the same time, no university has enough money to fund everything, and every university wants to maintain its standards. So every provost is in an impossible and seemingly insoluble double-bind. One of my goals today is to provide practical solutions to help universities move beyond this impasse.

My second personal declaration is affective. I like the scholarly books I'm reading these days. I know it is more sophisticated to make jaded remarks about the decline in the quality of scholarship, but I don't believe there has been a decline. In fact, when Oxford University Press asked me to write a substantial new introduction to a reissue of

Revolution and the Word,[2] reframing its argument and content for a new generation of readers, I embarked on a two-year crash course in books and articles written on eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American history and culture over the last fifteen years. As embarrassing as it may be, I will confess: reading scholarship as voraciously as any graduate student preparing for a prelim has been an exhilarating and even inspiring experience. The future of our profession is in good hands – if there is a future. I have been especially excited by the dozens of serious, scholarly first books I've read by junior scholars scrambling their way towards tenure. Then again, why would that be surprising? I myself was a junior scholar when I was researching and writing *Revolution and the Word*.

Because I am married to an editor and work in the provost's office, I am not allowed to have a connection to my own university press these days. However, simply being a scholar and an adviser of graduate students makes me intensely aware of the dire straits of scholarly publishing. Indeed, my recommendations have almost nothing to do with 'saving' university press publishing. Quite frankly, I am not interested in propping up fragile university press publishing businesses if what they offer is simply a watered-down version of trade publishing. I've published several books with trade publishers; they do a good job getting those books out to a large, general readership. My motivation in being on this panel at ACLS is to find ways to save the kind of scholarship that academics are trained to write and that is the basis of teaching and research at colleges and universities. At present, university press publishing provides the most careful, impartial, and efficient system of brokering, networking, evaluating, editing, publishing, and distributing serious scholarship. It does this exceptionally well when its acquisition programs are not skewed by economic pressures. In the future, we may come up with better and more cost-efficient ways to publish books. At present, if we believe in the value of scholarship, then we who hold leadership roles in our profession must devise the best ways to support university press publishing and rally the support of the profession as a whole.

And we need to act now. The costs of scholarly publishing are rising along with all academic costs. The more serious, rigorous, and specialized our scholarship, the more likely it is to lose money. Beleaguered publishers should not have to bear the brunt of the lose–lose economics of scholarship. Nor should strapped universities be re-

quired to bail out university presses every year as the economics of scholarly publishing fall further and further from the possibility of breaking even.

What we need is acknowledgement that scholarly publishing costs more than we are spending on it. It requires substantial subsidies and new ideas about where those infusions of capital might come from and how costs might be dispersed more equitably among those who benefit most from scholarly publishing – namely, scholars themselves. I hope that we can leave here today with a mandate to push Carlos Alonso's recommendations[3] further, create whatever task forces we need to create an action plan, and give ourselves a timeline by which to institute profession-wide change.

In that spirit, I'm going to throw out ten small, practical, and workable ideas for how to distribute the economic burden of scholarly publishing. Not all of these ideas are new; all need to be tested; some might be tried and then discarded if they prove untenable. I offer them less as solutions than as potential models for thinking about our collective responsibility. No one model will work. The point is to spark ideas, galvanize energies, and then sit down together and see what we can do.

1. Paying Our Dues

What if we involved all of our professional associations in a combined, considered, and well-publicized effort on behalf of scholarly publishing, emphasizing the responsibility of every individual and institutional member of the profession to the greater good that is academic research? The American Association of Universities (AAU) could, for example, pass a recommendation that every member of the profession who is tenured or coming up for tenure should be a dues-paying member of at least one national ACLS-affiliated association plus one other interdisciplinary, sub-field, or regional organization. This should be extended to the sciences, as well, since the outrageous costs of scientific journals are a key part of the problem. The dues should be sliding (as they generally are), based on salary. And a percentage of the total dues should be reserved for book subsidies that would be given to university presses, as should a portion of conference fees from any conference where a book prize is awarded. The details of how the subsidy would be implemented require working out. Carlos

Alonso has already set forth some viable ideas in his March 2003 *PMLA* Editor's Column[4] and in his talk today. Other fields may want to refine the process within their own structures. There might, for example, be book prizes in various sub-fields and interdisciplinary cross-fields, and prize money could be awarded to all university presses entering the contest as well as shared between the winning author and the press. This is essentially a reverse entrance fee to subsidize publishing in the field in which the prize is awarded. Since publishers have lists in certain areas, this would be one way of supporting the kind of work the prize is designed to honour. While this could happen with manuscripts before publication, that, it seems to me, duplicates work better done by publishers and doesn't really address the larger issue. A title subsidy isn't sufficient to support a whole list; you need a developed list in an area for all kinds of reasons studied by scholars in the field of history of the book – a network of reviewers, a reliable standard of peer evaluation, a target market to help in distribution (whether that be a booth at a conference or a mailing list). The reverse entrance fee allows for block or list subsidies, ensuring the health of the field and not simply of the winning entrant. It is a truism of publishers that those books that win the 'best book' prizes in their fields often lose the most money. Making prize money available to publishers could help support those books that receive the most scholarly esteem without penalizing their publishers.

Of course, as with all of these suggestions, another professional organization represented here today – the American Association of University Presses (AAUP) – would also have to take a responsible leadership role. If offering subsidies encourages publishers to see this as a boon (not a survival strategy) and as encouragement to expand their size, operations, and costs, then five years out we would be back in the same losing situation in which we find ourselves now, only more heavily taxed. Any profession-wide effort on behalf of scholarly publishing would have to come with equal assurances from AAUP's members that they would also earnestly address the situation and work in a coordinated fashion to stabilize the economics of scholarly publishing. I imagine this would require agreements among university presses: a challenging prospect, since university press publishing's lack of a vigorous profit motive does not prevent it from being extremely competitive. And that's a good thing, since the competition among publishers is one way that we ensure quality, rigour, progress,

and the promotion of cutting-edge thinking. It requires others more conversant with the business of academic publishing to figure out how to preserve competition, control expansion, and agree on methods for revenue sharing. If the NCAA can figure that out, the AAUP should be able to come up with something satisfactory.

2. Publishing Electronically

We're learning, fast, that electronic publishing isn't easy and isn't cheap. It does not represent the entire alternative to conventional publishing, and it will not solve the publishing crisis. Will it work in certain situations? Is it sometimes cost-effective? Yes. My colleague John Unsworth is in a far better position than I to comment on this subject, and so I'm going to defer to him but simply mark electronic publication as a solution that has been tried and found wanting – though I would want to try it again, under a different business model and with different expectations.

Among the many worthy possibilities for electronic publishing right now I would include the creation and preservation of more machine-readable databases, multimedia data banks, genetic texts, and multilingual editions of texts. Printing-on-demand (POD) publishing ventures are a promising way of gaining access to books no longer in print and hold possibilities for the future in small fields that will never be able to 'break even' under any financing model. There is also much work to be done with preservation of 'born digital' materials, meta-standards for archiving and searching, collaborative multi-site and multinational projects with open source access for any who wishes to contribute, and many exciting electronic publishing projects. None of these, at present, offers all that university presses do, and most of these electronic projects require either volunteer labour or considerable subsidies of their own. They are thus a wonderful addition to the scholarly arsenal but are by no means a 'solution' to the crisis in scholarly publishing.

3. Start-Up Packages

Several people have suggested book subsidies as part of start-up packages for junior faculty in book publishing fields analogous to start-up packages in the sciences. I'd like to refine that model a bit, since, in my

role as a vice provost overseeing interdisciplinary research centres across Duke's eight schools, I'm always aware of escalating costs throughout the university and sceptical of plans that simply add costs to existing structures. Added costs in one area mean reduced expenditures in another. Add-on subsidies pit the university press against, for example, the new humanities centre. Why make that bargain?

A strategic way of promoting the start-up package idea (without adding to already overtaxed budgets) is for ACLS or AAU to make a recommendation that universities take their 2004–2005 salary levels – across the board, in all fields – and subtract $500 in order to create a publishing subsidy pool. New as well as current (i.e., junior and senior) faculty members could be guaranteed a publishing subsidy drawn from this pool. I'd suggest $10,000 per book in book publishing fields, and a field-specific sliding amount for journal publications, to be awarded to a book that has already successfully completed the review process by a university press (rather than a commercial enterprise). Such a distributed cost works out about right given attrition rates of untenured faculty members, those who do not ever draw from the publishing-subsidy pool, and investment possibilities for the pool itself. Needless to say, I would prefer that faculty salaries continue to rise *and* that there be a book-subsidy pool, but that is not realistic in the present economy.

This strategic reallocation of existing resources would be an excellent investment for the university as well as for the individual scholar. This year, one of my former students (an Americanist, by the way) received a dozen form rejections saying, 'we do not publish first books in literature.' He wasn't able to find a press that would read his manuscript. And if no one is publishing first books, how will he ever publish a second one? I'm sure everyone in this room has a similar story to tell. I know my student would have preferred a modest decline in his assistant professor salary if it would have given him a weapon in the battle to enter our profession. I see no reason why this arrangement could not be adapted to senior as well as junior faculty – and it might even be an incentive for those struggling with that crucial post-promotion book. Some universities (Michigan, Cornell, and, to a lesser extent, Emory) provide subsidies to their faculty already. If this became a nation-wide policy, with costs distributed in a way similar to what I am suggesting, it could make an enormous difference. With a $10,000 subsidy per book, 100 books a year would receive a $1 million

revenue infusion. That could go a long way toward ending the red ink for publishers and their universities.

4. Scaled Subsidies

For those universities and colleges requiring scholarly books and journals for tenure and promotion but without university presses of their own, book subsidies should be twice as much: $20,000 per book and perhaps $1000 per scholarly article. How they pay for it could be on the model suggested above or in other ways that suit their own institutional funding structures and resources. The point must be made, however, that we need to take collective responsibility for the good now provided to the entire profession by those universities that do subsidize scholarly publishing.

5. Tax Write-Offs in Lieu of Royalties

Many of us receive tiny cheques every year from our publishers. One of my first books brings in somewhere between $37 and $50 a year. What if, instead of a cheque, university presses sent a royalty statement and gave authors an option: either request the cheque or send back the statement and ask that it be converted from income into a tax-deductible gift to help subsidize first books or books in a given field. The same could be done for advances. It's ridiculous how we currently make decisions on which publisher to go with over a $500 advance on a book that will lose $5000. Or, again, instead of offering manuscript reviewers the choice between so many books or the whopping sum of $150, why not provide the option of a tax-deductible contribution? Each book so subsidized would have an acknowledgment indicating that 'A subsidy for the publication of this book was made possible by generous authors committed to the survival of university press publishing.' Their gifts would be small tokens in a larger project of cultural change.

6. Elimination of Course Packs

University press books are often less expensive than course packs and entail less hassle than all the copyright issues of today's course packs. Furthermore, it is good for everyone, including instructors, to read a whole book occasionally.

7. Battling the Commercial Science Publishers

I'm not sure that, in the end, it would help university presses economically to take on commercial science publishers such as Elsevier, but it would be good on many levels if academic presses were publishing science journals and charging less than the current astronomical subscription rates. A library subscription to *Brain Research*, for example, costs approximately $20,000 a year, while *Bioorganic and Medicinal Chemistry Letters* runs closer to $30,000. A 'takeover' by university press publishing would (a) be a fairer and less costly system for scientists, thus helping to make scientists, too, appreciative of the role served by university presses; (b) help libraries put their expenses back in line; and (c) in so doing, help the bottom line of universities – again, a greater good.

8. Using the University's Teaching and Research Mission to Promote Scholarly Books

Every university home page should have links to university press books that deal with topics of importance to courses, initiatives, conferences, invited speakers, and so forth. Click here and go to a centralized online bookstore comprising a consortium of university press publishers. If such a publishing venture were found to violate antitrust laws, then all university web sites could bypass Amazon.com (with its heavy discounting) and go directly to the University of Chicago's legendary Seminary Co-Op Bookstore – surely one of the nation's most valiant supporters of scholarly publishing.

9. Data Collecting

In the current conversation about 'the crisis,' book publishing is often presented by university administrators as if it were an add-on to the already expensive fields of the humanities and narrative social sciences – those fields considered to be 'soft,' 'weak sisters,' 'incapable of supporting themselves.' I'm not so sure. I want the data. What if all of our associations worked together to challenge our business schools to try to model the full economics of the modern university? How much do the book publishing fields cost a university? If we are going to talk about the corporatizing of universities, let's see 'the books' – and not an Arthur Andersen–style cooking of those books, but real costs, real

expenses: buildings, M&O, salaries, start-up packages, labs, post-docs, staff, cost-sharing, ICRs, and all the apparatus of the science and technology fields driven by 'external funds.' How much does that photonics or free electron lab really cost? How much tuition revenue is brought in by the sciences as opposed to liberal arts teaching in book publishing fields? It may turn out English departments are cash cows – in which case, it is only right and just that literary scholarship yield some rewards in the form of book subsidies for all its institutional heavy lifting. In the corporate rhetoric of the university, the liberal arts often seem like a pariah. We may, in fact, be the capitalists keeping the system afloat.

10. Institutional Branding and Public Relations

I know at least one or two regional universities that became major national players through heavy investing in the humanities and social sciences. It's an easier and more cost-effective way to improve national rankings than by trying to raise the calibre of the science and engineering faculties. It's also an efficient way to change a university's profile or 'brand,' because controversy is commonplace in the humanities and social sciences – and controversy is publicity. University presses sometimes 'fill out' the offerings of their parent institutions. A great list in a specialty area often brands the university in areas where the university may not have faculty or research strengths. It costs far less to build a publishing reputation in a high-prestige area that doesn't have high student enrolment than it does to create a new department. How can university presses receive more credit for this?

Presses can also do more to be interwoven into the fibre of their universities. Targeted alumni catalogues (with gift and naming opportunities, too); alumni book clubs and press discounts; university press books with handsome book plates as the routine prize for service (instead of the dorky five-year pin); gift certificates for the university press in the welcome baskets of incoming students; graduate fellowships paid partly in scrip (say, $500 a year) that could be used to buy university press books – perfect for the online university press co-op suggested above. Even simple kinds of in-house advertising could pay off. Bulletin boards with tearsheets for current books in the field could be posted outside every department, offering graduate students heavy discounts on selected backlist books.

These seem like tiny gestures, but all aid in making presses more visible to their own universities. They all help educate faculty in non–book publishing fields about the importance of the press. What is the overall cost/benefit of the university press in terms of reputation and lustre? Provosts should not only be seeing red when the university press is mentioned; they should be seeing an opportunity. I remember a visit by press directors to the provost's Academic Priorities Committee at Duke. They came with about twenty very handsome new books, slid them down the middle of the table, and said, 'Here. They're free. Everybody take one!' And the scramble was on. It was not hard, after that, to make the case that scholarly publishing was important. Yet a good half of the faculty at the table admitted that, until that moment, they had had no idea what the university press really did. University presses need to make themselves far more visible to the universities that support them.

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Will we, today, solve 'the crisis in academic publishing?' No. If we go out and form task forces and action committees, if we manage to work together in a model of collective action, will we make the problem go away? I don't think so. *But we don't have to.* What I'm proposing is something far more modest and bold: that we put into effect adjustments that will *improve* the situation for the present. After that, we must persist in collective watchfulness to ensure that these adjustments are working, and that they are not having unanticipated negative results in one sector that will eventually hurt every sector.

Right now, we are putting far too much effort into analysis of the problem and not enough into change. We must learn from the plug-and-play model of business. We need to try one thing – and then try another. We are not in an environment where long-range planning makes sense, because all of the conditions are in flux at once: market conditions, tax structures, demographics, state spending, technology infrastructure, new methods of evaluating productivity, and so on. We must anticipate ways that the economics of publishing might change again (as they most assuredly will) and have the dexterity and the mandate to adapt accordingly.

Universities do not have unlimited resources; if they did, we wouldn't be holding this panel today. We can't keep shifting the blame,

and we can't keep looking for individual fixes and then lament when another press loses its intellectual mission, lays off its literature editor, or curtails its monographs. We academics cannot continue to see ourselves as innocents in a process whose fate is decided by others. Innocence is not bliss – it is professional suicide. The problem of university press publishing is *our* problem, and we must solve it. I believe that professional associations, such as the collective body represented by ACLS, must take leadership roles. It undermines all we stand for as a profession if the only way scholarly presses can survive is by looking for books that sell. French history is less valuable than Latin American history because it doesn't sell as well? That's preposterous. Until we realize, as individuals and institutions, that we cannot expect something for nothing, the current situation will deteriorate even further. And then, as P.T. Barnum predicted, we shall all be cheated.

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2 Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 2004)

3 Carlos J. Alonso, 'Having a Spine: Facing the Crisis in Scholarly Publishing,' *PMLA* 118, 2 (March 2003): 217–23. A talk based on this column formed part of the panel discussion at the ACLS (see note 1 above).

4 Ibid.