

E-presses punch well above their weight: They are the future of scholarly monograph publishing

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*University e-presses might be small and underfunded, but **Agata Mrva-Montoya** argues that with innovative technology and an understanding of the scholarly ecosystem, they ensure that important, publically-funded research is distributed among the population who fund it.*



This article first appeared on the [LSE Impact of Social Science blog](#)

As elsewhere in the world Australian academics are not free from the pressure to ‘publish or perish’ and they rely on scholarly publishing to report and disseminate research results and advance their careers. The specific guidelines are defined by the requirements of [HERDC \(Higher Education Research Data Collection\)](#) and [ERA \(Excellence of Research for Australia\)](#). To be recognised, books or journal articles need to demonstrate ‘substantial scholarly activity’ and contribute to the advancement of knowledge; they need to be original, reviewed by peers, and published by a commercial publisher.

This is problematic as Australia’s market for scholarly monographs, that is books aimed primarily at other scholars, is too small to support commercially based operations. With close to 40 universities with centralised libraries and very efficient interlibrary loan systems, there are simply not enough institutional or individual customers to sustain traditional publishing process without major subsidies.

Australian scholarly publishing

While Australian scholars working in the field of science, medicine and technology tend to publish journal articles and have always been able to find international publishers for their research output, those working in the humanities and social sciences (the disciplines where the monograph is the primary method of scholarly communication) and specialising in Australian topics, have been less likely to attract publishing contracts overseas.

To support these scholars several universities opened presses specialising in humanities and social sciences. During the 20th century Melbourne University Press (MUP) opened alongside University of Western Australia Press (UWAP) University of Queensland Press (UQP), UNSW Press and Sydney University Press (SUP), and Australian National University Press. Other universities followed.

The golden era of monograph publishing did not last long. The 1970s brought the reduction in higher education funding, which affected university presses and libraries in Australia. Cuts in library budgets, combined with significant price increases of journal subscriptions, started a decline in the purchasing of scholarly monographs, particularly in the humanities and social sciences; a decline that continues to the present owing to the ever-growing cost of journal subscriptions, the impact of the global financial crisis and vagaries of government funding.

With declining monographs sales and diminishing financial support from host universities, presses were forced to look for new sources of revenue or be closed down, which was the fate of presses at ANU, Sydney, Deakin and La Trobe for example. Other presses expanded their publishing operation to include new, money-generating markets of textbook, professional and trade publishing.

Four university presses (MUP, UNSW Press, UWAP and UQP) were restructured with a more commercial focus at the cost of their scholarly publishing programs. The management of these four presses reduced or stopped altogether the loss-making academic monograph publishing in an attempt to make the presses commercially viable and save them from closures. Instead they focused on books for the general readership including fiction, general non-fiction, children's books, illustrated reference books or textbooks.

Over the years the four presses have become established cultural institutions that contribute greatly to the intellectual and political life of Australia launching the careers of celebrated authors such as David Malouf, Peter Carey and Kate Grenville (UQP), as well as publishing headline-grabbing biographies and memoirs of top politicians (MUP). These contributions, however, rarely fit in the category of scholarly publishing as defined by HERDC and ERA.

Apart from the four university presses, there are very few conventional publishing houses that publish monographs in Australia such as CSIRO Publishing in Melbourne (science), Australian Scholarly Publishing in Melbourne (social sciences and humanities), Federation Press in Sydney (law and government), Academic Press in Brisbane (psychology) and Crossing Press in Adelaide (histories of Australian minorities).

The new generation of university presses

Responding to the need for new outlets for scholarly research, over the last 10 years several universities (for example, ANU, the University of Sydney, Monash University, the University of Adelaide) have reopened or established innovative publishing programs based on new communication technologies, XML-driven digital workflows, open systems and softwares, cost-effective processes and new business models.

The new presses are based in or closely collaborate with university libraries and combine an established publishing knowledge with the expertise of the library staff in areas such as digitisation, data management, archiving, preservation and faculty relationships. The close association between library and university press, or indeed the integration of the press into the library structure is not limited to Australia. Many university libraries in the US [provide publishing services](#) exploring the increasingly convergent roles that libraries and publishers play in scholarly communication practices.

The degree of institutional support that the e-presses receive varies and they rely on grants and subsidies, and experiment with different combinations of paid and free access to content in print and digital environments. They also operate on a not-for-profit basis.

In comparison with the traditional university presses, the e-presses are small, underfunded and perceived as relatively invisible, since their books are rarely stocked in chain bookshops or reviewed in mass media. I agree that they lack well-established marketing and distribution processes, but they make up for it with innovative solutions and a thorough understanding of the scholarly ecosystem.

In reality, the e-presses punch well above their weight in terms of publishing output, scholarly impact and capacity to innovate. ANU ePress, Sydney University Press and Monash University Publishing (active since 2003) between them publish close to 100 scholarly books a year and have an active backlist of over 700 titles.

As the traditional methods of mass printing and distribution are not suitable for scholarly books that tend to have specialist and limited audiences, the new presses release their titles as free-to-download digital files or as print-on-demand books. In this way, the presses ensure that the important and publicly funded research is available to the general public and never goes out of print.

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