

The University Press Redux: Balancing traditional university values with a culture of digital innovation.

*This week the first UK conference on the state and future of university presses is taking place. The university press concept has regained strength in recent years and in the last 12 months alone a host of new presses have been launched in the UK. **Anthony Cond**, Director of Liverpool University Press shares his thoughts on the changing landscape of scholarly publishing, the value of bringing together perspectives from the more established presses and the new, emerging players, and new directions for the university to play a more integral role. Just as presses can learn from those longer established, the established presses can learn a thing or two from the reassertion of traditional university press values by the new university presses, not least the idea of serving home institution as well as specific disciplines.*



As all good literary and film scholars will tell you the term ‘redux’ has multiple and subtly different meanings. For some it connotes a new interpretation of an existing work, more literally the word means ‘brought back, restored.’ Both are accurate descriptions of what is happening to the university press in the UK: it is no accident that this week will see a conference called The University Press Redux.

The university press enjoys a peculiar position: a publishing island atop a sea of academia, its insecurities are a mirror to the budgetary, utility and reputational concerns of the subjects and institution it serves. Presses report to senior university managers, librarians or university or quasi-university committees; their editorial boards are drawn from faculty, yet more faculty are engaged as series editors, authors and reviewers, and more still in the inevitable exchange of ideas that happens when an academic department and a scholarly publisher active in its discipline are in close proximity. The university press is a touch point — above and beyond the author/purchaser/reader relationship with commercial publishers — between the academy’s hopes and fears and the realities of the scholarly communication system.

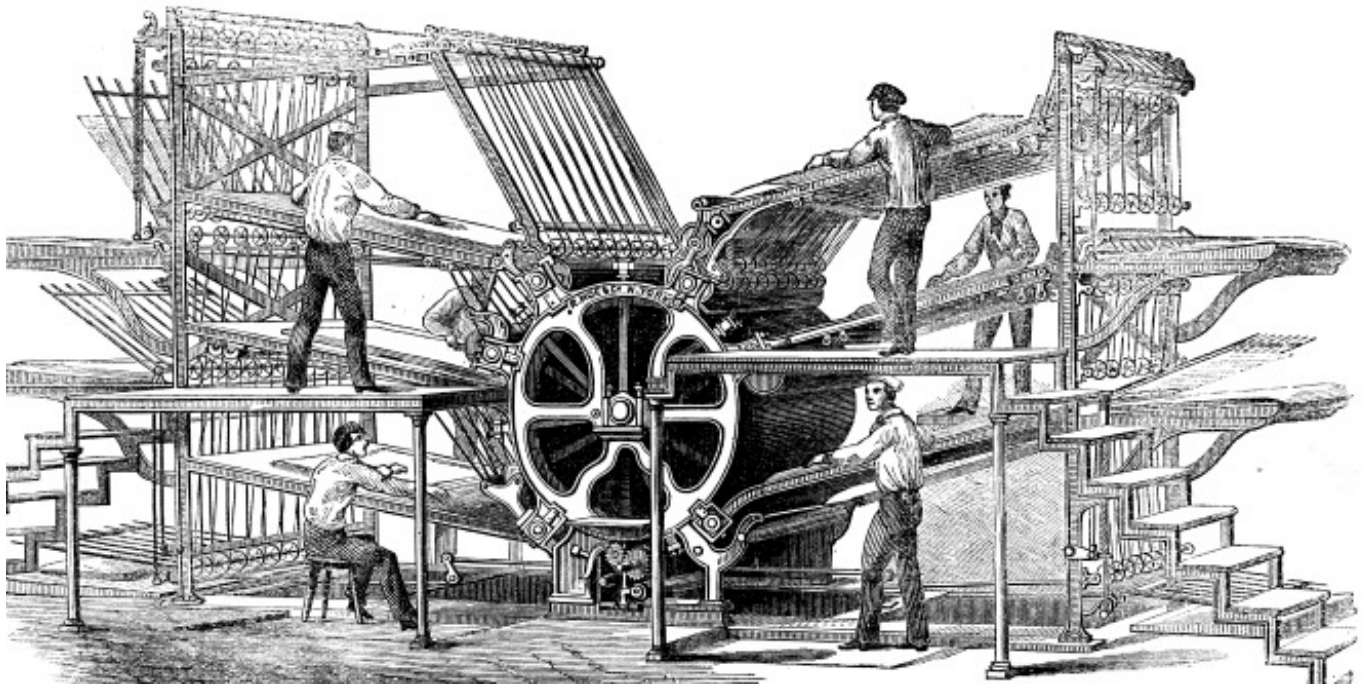


Image credit: Richard March Hoe's printing press—six cylinder design (Public Domain)

The rekindling of interest in the university press model in the UK is an indicator of dissatisfaction with that system, and of a hope to control the means of production and thus navigate more successfully the choppy waters of open access, digital scholarship, funding policies, authorial conservatism, challenging library budgets, publishing consolidation, internationalisation and new business models.

In the last 12 months alone a host of new presses have been launched in the UK. Goldsmiths Press exists 'to create a culture around academic knowledge practices that is more inventive and less constrained than it is now.' Dissemination is UCL Press's goal and its measures of success are based on that idea, with the benefits of visibility for institutional research, wider use by policy makers and the hope of attracting academics and students to the institution as additional perceived benefits. Leeds, Sheffield and York libraries have neatly shared the financial risk of a start-up through the establishment of a White Rose University Press and will focus on both open access dissemination of research and teaching materials. University of Westminster Press, resident in a Corporate Communications department, has come into being 'to provide global public access to academic work in multiple formats.' At the time of writing there are at least eight further UK institutions weighing up the idea of a university press.

The common thread here, despite slightly different funding models and situations, is Open Access. Whatever the problems of a dysfunctional system, is an OA UP really a magic bullet? Can these new presses really take back some ownership for their hosts? We've been here before. The advent of digital printing in the late 1990s and early 2000s brought the same kind of thinking. Of a number of start-up university presses in the UK from that era only one remains and it is here that an important lesson can be learnt.

A striking thing happened at the Independent Publishing Awards on 3rd March this year. Amidst a short-list that included two global titans of the industry, Sage and Bloomsbury, a small university-based publisher from the West of England walked away with the title Academic and Professional Publisher of the Year. Founded twenty years ago by Alison Shaw, Policy Press at the University of Bristol began on a shoestring budget, a minor add-on to a social sciences department. Growing to become the publisher of high profile authors such as Peter Hain and Danny Dorling and publishing more than 120 books a year and seven journals, its social justice mission and ethos of publishing research and critical thinking to improve policy making, practice and social well-being has been a

constant throughout.

Policy's success is directly attributable to finding an editorial niche, serving and being valued by the scholars of its field, and retaining its mission focus whilst always walking an inevitable financial tightrope. The new university presses must value traditional editorial nous alongside Open Access and a culture of innovation. They can learn much from the strategic single-mindedness and clarity of editorial vision of Policy Press. A tight focus will bring profile and quality to the list, will keep costs down in what will surely be subsidised entities for the foreseeable future, and will enable the new presses to spend coherently and strategically in marketing. Alignment with a strength of the wider institution will only enhance their role.

Just as new presses can learn from those longer established, the established presses can learn a thing or two from the reassertion of traditional university press values by the new university presses, not least the idea of serving home institution as well as specific disciplines. The leaders of long-standing UPs now manage simultaneously an established print-based business and a digital start-up, and in between the two a set of skills has emerged that can directly support a press's home institution if press and university are willing. At the University of Liverpool this manifests itself in a partnership between the Press and the Library to develop bespoke Open Access e-textbooks, one of which, tapping into discussions of student experience and satisfaction, will replace a £56 textbook from a commercial publisher on a course with 1000 students per annum.

Alongside the scholarly community we were established to serve, all university presses are in a period of transition. We want to manage that process in such a way as to continue and enhance the ultimate goal of knowledge dissemination, for, as the book historian Tom Mole has written, 'if we get it right new understandings of what a book can be will enable academic work that at present remains unwritten, indeed unthought.'

The [University Press Redux Conference](#) organised by Liverpool University Press in association with the Academic Book of the Future project will run in Liverpool this week.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Anthony Cond is the Director of Liverpool University Press, both The Bookseller Independent Academic, Educational and Professional Publisher of the Year 2015 and The IPG Frankfurt Book Fair Academic and Professional Publisher of the Year 2015.

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