Crisis and Change: A University Press Environmental Scan

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The following is a lightly edited transcript of the closing keynote address delivered March 6, 2014 at the inaugural Library Publishing Forum in Kansas City, Missouri.

So, why am I here today? I know we're all suffering from a food coma. We're all tired. We're thinking about our flights, maybe about a tight connection, maybe even about jumping an earlier fight. Well, unless you're a chairman's preferred platinum two million miler, you're not getting on an earlier flight today. So hang tight.

And, really, so much has been said in the past two days. It's a little intimidating to stand here and think about whether there's anything new or even interesting that I can add to the fantastic series of conversations that have occurred over the past two days.

So what can I do? I can share a little bit about the results of what's come to be called my Listening Tour, during which I've visited 40 university presses, with more to come. I can talk a bit about the Listening Tour and some of the things that it's done for me and for the university press community. I can talk about the one thing that scares me the most about our future. There are lots of things that scare me a little bit, but there's one thing that scares me a lot. And then, given the venue, given the group, and given the fantastic energy, I want to spend some time talking about some of the things that I think we can do together.

What exactly is a Listening Tour? First, it's a phrase that I borrowed from my friend Elliott Shore at the ARL. Elliott is newish in his role, he has about a three month jump on me in his tenure and when he came on board he had the great idea to plan a series of visits with

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ARL's members. It seemed like such a great idea that I said, "You know what? I'm going to do the same thing, too." And since stealing the idea wasn't enough for me, I also stole the name. They had dubbed Elliott's visits The Listening Tour. So I said "Well, okay if it's good enough for ARL, it's good enough for AAUP!"

I have in fact visited 40 member presses from across the continent. I've hit every time zone. I'm actually going to fly over the water next month and try to expand the visit to some of our non-continental members. Frankly, the tour was originally designed to accelerate my own learning curve as a new director in the AAUP. In my deep, deep background I have some association management experience and in my more recent background, I've worked for what some folks consider to be a university press. But I really needed to test the things that I thought I knew about association management and the things that I thought I knew about our community. So I hit the road.

The Listening Tour has, however, evolved. It's now actually turned into a longer-term opportunity for the association to assess members' needs. In fact, the AAUP board met Monday and Tuesday of this week, and some of the things that arose on the Listening Tour have informed the strategic planning process that we undertook during the last two days.

I should pause to disclaim the things that I'm going to say next. My observations are my observations. While I will speak for a group of folks, as you'll hear in a moment, in this case that's a challenging thing to do.

What have I been hearing? I've been hearing that university presses are crazy-diverse. I've been hearing that university presses are in crisis. I've been hearing that university presses are misaligned. And I've observed clearly that university presses are changing. So I'll talk about all four of those things, starting with the diversity in university presses.

University presses elude generalization. They vary tremendously, and some of this will be familiar, but I think some of the implications of it may be a little subtler. They vary tremendously by size. They vary by whether they are affiliated with a public or private institution. Being a university press at a land-grant institution has its own separate set of responsibilities. Being a university press for a system press Florida, like UNC, like the SUNY Press, like the University of California Press, also has a special set of responsibilities that come with it, that the non-system presses within the organization don't necessarily face.

Funding and finances of course are key drivers of the diversity within the university press community. Many of us get subventions from our host institutions. Some of us have substantial endowments to rely on. Some of us have robust fundraising program. Some of

us, believe it or not (and not just the big ones), some of us actually are expected to give back to our parent institutions in crazy ways. There's one particular university press I have in mind here, which falls into our smallest membership category, which gets a subvention of about $150,000, but because it's at a faith-based institution it's also expected to tithe back ten percent of its top line. That's a challenge. That's a serious challenge for that tiny press.

I think another way that we're diverse is in our publishing mix. We all publish books. Some of us publish journals. A few of us even publish textbooks. We all hope that our monographs get adopted as supplementary course readings, of course, but a few of us actually do have textbook publishing programs. And the mix varies depending on discipline. Most of our members are largely humanities and social sciences publishers, but if you're a university press doing STEM publishing, the world feels a little bit different again.

So what are the lessons here? Well for me there are two lessons. The first one I think is—and this is very particular to my own prior experience—when I first came into the role I thought that the biggest thing that made Oxford University Press (OUP) different from other university presses is its size, right? Wouldn't you think that? But you know what? While size matters, it turns out that the biggest difference is that OUP is four thousand miles away from its institution. And when you are on campus and you're part of an ecosystem, life is very different in lots of good and sometimes challenging ways.

So the second point about this is that generalizations for a group of 135 folks—two-thirds of whom have the same two words in their name ("university press")—are harder than you'd think. There's always going to be somebody standing in the back of the room who can raise their hand and say "Well, you know what? It's actually not that way at my press." So there you go. That's the first challenge: university presses are diverse.

What's next? University presses are in crisis. University presses have been in crisis, off and on, for 50 or 60 years now. The sources change with each crisis, but we do sort of stumble from crisis to crisis. So who are the culprits this time? I think the culprits are technology and the corporatization of the academy. And I'll circle back to each one.

Technology is a substantial challenge for university presses in three ways. First of all technology requires scale. You know Random House bought Penguin. In a million years, Yale University Press is not going to acquire a Harvard University Press. So without that kind of combination, how do university presses get scale?

The second reason that technology is a particular challenge for university presses is it's hitting our workflow simultaneously in three ways. It's hitting all of our back office systems,

it's hitting our production systems, and it's also hitting the way we deliver the finished product in the form of simultaneous print and e-books.

So it has hit every department of the organization simultaneously in core ways. And then the most important thing—and I'll touch on this more later—is that technology is also about to have a very profound impact on our scholars' workflows. For reasons that I'll talk about in a couple of minutes, that's something that university presses actually haven't even started to wrap their brains around.

I need to round out the discussion of the corporatization of the academy. I almost glossed over this because for this audience we're very close to a "duh" moment right here. You've been living with the impact of corporatization and the invasion of the MBAs probably longer than university presses have. We've managed to fly under the radar until three, four, five years ago. So we're only still starting to make our peace with it, and it's difficult because we don't know how to respond to the questions that are being asked—and that's frankly because some of them are a little offensive, right?

There was an article in the *Economist* last fall where I was quoted as saying "No one asks the chemistry department to make a profit." And you know there're two things I regret about that quote. It was a good quote, but first of all I wish that I had said political science instead of chemistry because in fact, occasionally a chemistry department gets a patent. And truthfully, the really even cleverer rejoinder to that quote is "yet," right?

So we all know which way the wind is blowing and we all have to be thinking about filthy lucre in ways that perhaps we're not comfortable with.

A new, lower order, but still important, crisis that we're facing now relates to peer review and tenure. And peer review is a funny topic for university presses because we've always assumed that peer review is a sacred cow. It's the one thing that we all agree on. Peer review is literally how university presses define themselves. Full membership in AAUP requires a peer review program that meets certain criteria, for example. But simultaneously, it's also how the rest of the ecosystem defines us. We thought that the fact that we did peer review was the one non-delegable bit of university press publishing. So the à la mode attacks on our peer review function baffle me at a molecular level. I've seen the software tools; they're awesome, they're great. But they're work flow management solutions. They're not a replacement for editorial judgment. Someday. Not yet.

The other challenge with technology displacing discretion and judgment in peer review is that crowdsourcing anything always kind of scares me. The loudest, loneliest voices tend

to dominate any conversation. But the interesting thing about crowdsourced reviews is perhaps best understood through an anecdote. I heard somebody tell a story the other day in which someone who had died fifty years ago came back today and said "How would you explain the one most significant difference between life today and life when I passed away?" And the response was, "I have a device in my pocket that gives me instant access to the entire accumulated wisdom of mankind. And I use it to watch cat videos and fight with strangers." And I'd like to think that the bar would be a little bit higher than that for crowdsourced peer reviews. And while I think, too, that tools like SSRN are hugely beneficial for helping to develop a scholarly argument, I'm concerned that we're not at a point yet where technology is able to help us make the ultimate evaluation, not to help decide if a particular piece of scholarship fits in a continuum of scholarly communications (what we used to call a "list" in university press publishing). I don't doubt that we'll get there, but I don't see it happening in the short term. So I think the whole enterprise of poking at peer review is a little premature.

The other aspect of this particular crisis is tenure. And university presses have, I think, a very schizophrenic relationship to the tenure process in the humanities and social sciences. On one hand, we do understand our role in the process, and the financial benefit that inures to us from it. On the other hand, no university press actually perceives its fundamental purpose as being a cog in the tenure machine. So we have these two tensions and while we're wrestling with that, technology is forcing the academy to ask really appropriate questions about what scholarship should qualify for promotion and tenure decisions. In a digital age, we're still thinking entirely about promotion and tenure in print terms and that's wrong. So we generally agree that these questions need to be asked, but we're also mindful about the implications of the answers for our print runs.

So if we've been in crisis before, what's different this time? I think two things are different. One is scope and two is velocity. I think that the changes that are occurring now, because of technology, are occurring more rapidly and on a much larger scale than we're going to have time by ourselves to react to and to recalibrate for. And again I'll share a little bit more about this when I come to my greatest concern.

So what have we said so far? We're diverse. We're in crisis. Next, we're also structurally misaligned within the academy and I think that plays out in three important ways.

First of all we're misclassified on virtually every campus in the country as an auxiliary unit. I have member press directors who share reporting responsibility with parking garage managers. I live in New York, I don't have a car, but I hear parking garages are pretty important. So my purpose here is not to denigrate the role of universities' parking garage

managers, but I don't think it's an appropriate alignment for university presses and parking garage managers to be thought of in the same way. Similarly, and partly as a result of that, we're required to traffic in commerce in ways that are alien to virtually every other part of the scholarly communications ecosystem. Occasionally that gets us into real trouble. Occasionally it's a source of strength and new information and frankly resilience.

The second way in which university presses are structurally misaligned is, by design, we publish predominantly from outside our own institutions, and that makes us outward facing in a way that all of our peers across our campuses aren't, and it creates some different ways of thinking about the world and some different tensions when dealing with colleagues who are focused on their own campuses.

Then the third way in which we are structurally misaligned is that there are perhaps 3200 colleges and universities, but only 135 university presses. We are serving a disproportionate number of institutions that don't have their own university presses and it creates some interesting challenges for the universities that do have presses. We talk about this traditionally in terms of a "free rider" problem. And the notion there is if you are university "x" and only 15 percent of your own scholars are being published by your university's press, and the other 85 percent are coming from universities that don't have any presses, those other universities that those 85 percent represent aren't contributing financially to the system. It's a free ride.

The free rider problem exacerbates some of the new business models that we've tried to experiment with, like a press that has decided—and we do have them—a press that has decided to go immediately and entirely to fully open access publishing. But it also creates some new opportunities. One of the many cool things about Knowledge Unlatched, which I think we talked a little bit about yesterday, is that it tackles the free rider problem head on. Just another piece of the puzzle in the three ways in which we're structurally misaligned.

So we're misaligned, we're in crisis, we're diverse. What's left?

We're also changing, and this is really exciting and I think I'm about to share some information that may be a little surprising.

We're experimenting with open access in ways that I think many people in this room will be surprised and pleased to hear about. We've heard about a couple of efforts over the past two days—Florida's Orange Grove Press for textbooks, UVa's Rotunda—and just bear with me for about ninety seconds and I'll share a little bit more.

So we're trying, but we know—we know particularly because we've had to live with commerce for 50, 75 and in some presses' cases 125 years—we know that Open Access actually has to be sustainable. Because it turns out that information doesn't really want to be free.

Wait! What did I just say? The real story behind that quote I think is hugely interesting. According to Wikipedia (so we know it's true!), that iconic phrase is attributed to Stewart Brand. If you don't know who Stewart is, he is, according to Wikipedia, a bit of a post-nuclear renaissance man who among other things edited the *Whole Earth Catalog*. In its fullest form, it appears that Brand first uttered the quote when he was speaking with Steve Wozniak at the very first hacker conference in Marin in 1984. And here's what he allegedly said. "On the one hand information wants to be expensive because it's so valuable." I love this. "The right information in the right place, just changes your life. On the other hand information wants to be free because the cost of getting it out is getting lower and lower all the time." So you have these two fighting against each other. Precise attribution is a little tough because it was after all a hacker conference. But Brand is in fact documented as having made substantially similar comments in numerous other places. And what's interesting to me about this quote—besides the near permanent convolution of it—is its full implication for how we get to Open Access. If you're a Hegelian (or Kantian, if you want to be a purist), and if you believe that progress unfolds through dialectics, free and expensive absolutely have to exist in tension with each other in order to get to where we want to be. In other words you don't have synthesis until you have thesis and antithesis.

If you're not sure how you feel about Hegelian dialectics, that's okay. The logic still obtains; in all likelihood, we won't achieve Open Access—and I will say that as mission-based publishers, the notion of the broadest possible dissemination of our scholarship resonates absolutely—until free and expensive fully understand each other and find ways to support each other's goals.

So we're trying to figure out how to make open access sustainable. What else is changing at university presses?

You've heard a little bit over the past couple of days about some of the ways that we're experimenting with technology. Most of us have or are very close to simultaneously releasing our front list both in print and electronic. Many of us have converted or are converting our back lists to electronic and in fact many of you have been helping us do that. We're also experimenting with new formats, like digital shorts and aggregation platforms like Project MUSE and University Press Scholarship Online. We're experimenting with digital content. Remember that, because there's more to the technology story than just digital content.

So university presses are changing. What about AAUP? Is AAUP changing? Let me just share a few really interesting statistics with you.

Our current board of directors has 13 members. Three of them report to libraries. A fourth is the director of a fully open access press, and that fourth by the way is our incoming president. There's more of that kind of change afoot. I can't talk about it yet, but I think that when you hear about the next generation of board appointments, you'll see that the trend is continuing. Some of this is a generational shift. Currently there are 11 of the 135 university presses with open directorships. In addition to that, over the past two years 18 other presses have appointed new directors. That's 29 out of 135 presses with new leadership—and sometimes these appointments take a while—so we'll say over a three year period. I also can say from my 40 visits that the next tier of press management is young, energetic, open to new thinking, and utterly motivated by the mission. So all of that is really, really exciting.

Before I leave the generational shift, I should talk about another aspect of it, because it's important to put it in context. I have here on my notes, "Be candid, but remember that the tape is running."

So the generational shift, it does herald a philosophical shift as well. But there are a couple of important things to remember about that. First of all, because of our diversity, university presses won't all shift at the same time and frankly, we won't all shift in the same way. And before we dis the old philosophy, we do really have to understand where it came from and honor the service that it's provided to the academy in prior decades.

And finally let's remember one other really important thing: those three misalignments that I highlighted (the structural misalignment, the external focus, and the free-rider problem), they're not retiring. They're still going to be with us and they are going to create challenges and stresses for the new generation of press directors, including some of the "bold and reckless" individuals you've met here over the past two days.

So that's the past and the present. What about the future?

I'd like to share an experience from my on early days in publishing because I think it has a direct application for what I see in store for university presses (and by extension for library publishers) somewhere down the road. I have to confess, based on some of the conversations that I've heard over the past two days, I'm kind of inclined to the opinion that I might be about to preach to the choir a little bit. So you can tell me afterwards.

My career in legal publishing spanned those heady days in the 90s when we migrated our product line from print to electronic; first, believe it or not, through proprietary dial-in lines and then (as soon as Al Gore invented it!) via the Internet. There are two significant features from this experience that I think are relevant here. I'm going to speak in the language of commerce, but I bet we can translate it.

First, the same publisher still "owned" the author, the content, the customers, and its central role in the process when the migration from print to electronic was complete. It's caused no shortage of sleepless nights for me contemplating the possibility that the centrality of all university presses may not be a given once the technology disruption and its consequences achieve critical mass in the scholarly neck of the publishing woods. That is, I'm not sure that we're going to have the same central role when the print to electronic migration is completed.

But wait, there's more.

Second, the truly revolutionary thing about our migration was what followed it. Most customers found the initial journey painful—very painful. After it was done, and the dust settled, we'd moved their cheese and they'd adjusted. They got comfortable doing research online and they discovered that they liked these things called computers and it turned out that these things could do a whole bunch of other things. So they begin to push us to go further, to make our content do more for them—as did our authors.

For example, in the print world, legal publishers would provide binders for estate planners with sample forms and clauses. Initially we just migrated those binders of sample forms and clauses to electronic. And then we thought we'd get really smart and give people an MS Word file, a manipulable form of the sample clauses and documents. But then the cutting-edge practitioners that are really smart said "No, no, no. Don't do that. Really make it all hum for me. Build me document assembly software. Walk me through a wizard. Walk me through a Q & A that lets me select from sample forms and clauses and produce a draft that I can review and edit and present to my client." Pretty cool, huh? We did it. By the time I left Wolters Kluwer, we thought of ourselves as solutions providers. We barely even thought of ourselves as publishers anymore.

So what's the lesson here for university presses? Instead of focusing just on how technology is changing publishing from print to electronic, because we're actually getting okay with that, we really need to begin thinking about how technology is changing scholarship and what those changes mean for the workflow of our authors (our customers, the scholars), and therefore for us. And we're only just starting to think about that. And thinking about it is really scary for the reasons of scale that I pointed out earlier.

So that brings me to a final set of thoughts about the future. What are some of the things that we can do *together*? I've thought about this in three buckets.

We've heard a bunch of speakers over the past two days talk about all the things that libraries are good at, and all of the things that university presses are good at, and if you happened to visit AAUP's poster last night you might've also noticed that the really smart people in those presses and in those libraries who thought about it agree that our future endeavors should complement those respective strengths.

In the current environment, there's nothing to be gained and frankly a great deal to be lost, from reinventing the wheel. So I'll approach this from a university press perspective: what we're good at and where we struggle. Clearly, editorial expertise is the sine qua non of university press publishing. It is our USP, our unique selling proposition, and how we do it sets us apart even within the world of publishing.

Acquisitions editors, good ones anyway, do two critical things: they curate and they connect. An experienced editor with a strong list knows where the interesting scholarship is developing in a given field. These folks have a passion for their work that borders on the clinical, and they go about it from a singular vantage point. That makes an acquisitions editor a great resource for a library publishing project. She can help you connect with other scholars, sometimes in far flung quarters of academia, who may be working on the same interesting questions that your project is addressing.

The second critical thing that university presses do is they bring that great scholarship to a community of consumers. They market it. So there's an infrastructure in place that library publishing programs can and should take advantage of. Let's find opportunities to align library publishing programs with *kindred* marketing programs—bearing in mind that fit is really important here—and expose the scholarship to the broadest possible audience.

The other obvious thing that university presses do is that whole bundle of back-of-house activities that those who've never worked in publishing assume magically happens with the press of a button. I'm talking about production and fulfillment, and while they're the nuts and bolts of how we do our jobs, there is, for better or for worse, what is likely an irreversible trend towards consortial activity in these areas. So maybe the departure point here for us is to think about experiments in achieving scale that include both university presses and library publishers.

This brings me the most important thing that university presses struggle with and I've alluded to it several times: scale and technology. If you think back to my "life lessons" about

how legal publishers migrated from P (print) to E (electronic) to S (solutions), university presses are on the path from P to E, but I don't know that we have the scale to go from E to S on our own. But libraries might, and together we could.

On my Listening Tour, I've consistently seen two things on campuses where the university press has been aligned with the library. First, the press often moves to nicer, more centrally located digs. But the main thing that I've noticed is that presses generally find themselves having access to a much broader and much deeper array of technology resources. So if we're all serious about publishing and supporting the digital humanities, we need to build on that together. And we need to bring another piece to the table, too: the CTOs (chief technology officers) on all of our campuses.

So job one is avoiding duplication, leveraging strengths, and building collaborations. What else can we do together?

How about Cyril Oberlander's call for professional development. Let's create opportunities for library publishing professionals to undertake residencies and internships at university presses. Now this will be no small task. It requires an allocation of resources and the establishment of an infrastructure, neither of which currently exists, but I think it's essential if the enterprise that's brought us all together today is to succeed. And we want it to succeed. In fact, we want it to lead to even more university presses and even more library publishing programs.

When our president assumed office last June, he articulated a goal of 100 new university presses in ten years. I'll confess I was a little surprised, but why not? I noted earlier that there are 135 university presses doing the lifting for 3200 universities; why not try to improve that ratio? Now not all of you will choose to take your library publishing programs in that very specific—and I'll emphasize rigorous—direction, but for those of you who conclude it makes sense to do so I say, "Hell yes!"

Moving on to the last set of observations that I want to share. There was an effort on the part of university presses in the fall of 2012 to create more awareness of who we are and what we do through a very focused (and expensive) public relations campaign. We hired an outstanding and high-priced public relations expert in the city who introduced us to a whole bunch of the right editors at the right general interest publications: the *Times*, the *Atlantic*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Wall Street Journal*. As it turned out, the experiment was of limited utility. It was a learning experience. If you want to get an article placed in a general circulation periodical, you've got to feed them raw meat, and university

presses are a lot of things, but we don't generate a lot of raw meat. So it was tough to capture a lot of mind-share from these folks.

But one of the most interesting tidbits to come out of the entire experience was an offhand remark by the relevant editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, who referred to university presses as the "last interesting cultural institution in America." And I love that. I thought about it a lot because I wondered, "can that possibly be true?" And I thought about the things that are interesting and important to me, and two of the things that I like to do in my free time are theater and opera.

And, I have to ask: when was the last time that something successful on Broadway was not based on the film of the same name? So theater may not be the last interesting cultural institution in America. I know there's great stuff going on at the Guthrie and at the Goodman and at the Red Hat in Los Angeles, but it's exceptional. That's not the norm for theater.

Turning to the even more fabulously, outrageously, expensive world of opera: my partner and I lived in Chicago for a decade and when we left, we pined for the Lyric and we used to fly back out when we could to get our fix. I mean we live in New York; we have an opera company. But the Lyric did such wonderful stuff and they did it so well. Unfortunately, the work there has gotten so "safe" recently that we haven't been back in four years.

The interesting opera company in Manhattan, the City Opera, cratered. The Met. You know The Met is not going anywhere, but I think the single most interesting thing they've done is their HD broadcasts. Their successful new productions are actually co-productions--something that comes over from Covent Garden or the ENO. So in the areas that I know, I can point to exceptions, like Gotham Chamber Opera or the Chicago Opera Theater, which does hugely interesting site-specific stuff, but as a group, opera performances are not culturally exceptional. What they're doing is not, as a group, culturally interesting.

If I shift a little bit and I think about university presses, I've been to 40 of them now and I've seen all 135 of their catalogs. I cannot think of a single one that's not doing stuff that's culturally interesting. So it turns out that we're all exceptions and no rules and that dude from the *Wall Street Journal* might be right. We just may be the last interesting cultural institution in America.

I'm going to close actually on a very personal note. I pursued the opportunity to become AAUP's new Executive Director because, as you can tell, I believe so passionately in what it is that university presses do. We curate the scholarly argument across the humanities

and the social sciences, we present the academy's best and brightest to a public acutely in need of critical thought, and we document with authority the natural and cultural history of people and places. And we do these things, things that no commercial publisher would dare, against all odds and with joy in our hearts. These are things worth doing, things worth cherishing, and things worth fighting for.

When I introduced myself to the AAUP annual meeting last June, I told them all this, and I offered as a benediction a text that to me is sacred. And because I'm in awe of the energy that has pulsed through these halls for the past two days, I'm going to offer it again to all of you here today.

I'm reminded of Prior's valedictory to Belize in part two of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America."

> This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all and the dead will be commemorated and we'll struggle on with the living and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye now. You're fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More life.

Prior concludes, and so shall I, with the invocation he first received as the angel came crashing through his bedroom ceiling in the climax of Part One, "The great work begins."

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