Publishing Services: An Emerging Role for Research Libraries

By Karla Hahn

The following excerpt is based on an interview conducted by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer, at the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) 2008 Spring Task Force Meeting held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://connect.educause.edu/blog/gbayne/cnipodcastlibrarypublish/46665>.

Gerry Bayne: Can you talk about some of the traditional roles that research libraries have played, and contrast that with the developing roles of research libraries in scholarly communication today?

Karla Hahn: In the past, libraries have largely contributed to the scholarly communication cycle by collecting works after they have been published, organizing and managing them, and then ensuring that they’re available for the long term. And we’re still doing all of that. But in addition, we’ve become involved in both converting existing legacy content into digital form and, increasingly, developing publishing services. We’re moving into a different part of the scholarly communication cycle. We’re not just sitting at the end of the line behind the publishing part; we’re moving up closer to the research process and the scholarly communication that occurs during the research process.

Bayne: How do these services compete with or complement commercial publishers?

Hahn: There are many different ways in which library publishing services relate not just to commercial publishing but also to other traditional scholarly publishers. They also fit in with scholarly societies and university press publishing.

One of the things that was a little surprising to us in our survey arose when we asked libraries about the kinds of publications they were producing, especially journals. Most of the journals that they’re producing had worked with other publishers before coming to the library. So libraries were not so much launching new journals as working to help existing journals—perhaps helping them make a transition into electronic publishing or into open-access publishing.

And in some cases, unfortunately, various journals that were working with established publishers were simply let go. With the existing publishing models, a journal needs to have a certain revenue-generating capability. Different publishers have different standards for the amount of revenue the publication must be able to generate for them to work with it. And so some publications that are very scholarly and very high quality but that have a rather limited audience are starting to run into trouble.

This in some ways parallels what we’ve worried about for a while in the monograph world. As university presses have moved into a position where they have to increasingly generate all of the revenue for their publishing processes from the sales of their monographs, they’ve been finding it difficult to publish those monographs that just aren’t very marketable. And now we’re starting to see some of that happen in the journal world as well. Naturally enough, those journals that are not highly profitable are turning to libraries for assistance and are working with publishing services.

When we surveyed the libraries, we found that, collectively, they are starting to put out a couple hundred journals. In the scale of scholarly journal publishing, that’s still a very small proportion. And
Although library publishing services are expecting to scale up and handle more publications, no one I’ve talked to seems to think that research libraries are going to be taking over publishing from traditional publishers. They are largely occupying a somewhat different niche.

Another interesting development to note is a special situation in Canada. The Canadian government has given a fairly substantial grant of several million dollars to a project called Synergies (http://www.synergiescanada.org/index_en.html), which is a collaboration of a number of research libraries. The funding project is aimed specifically at bringing Canadian scholarly society journals in the humanities and social sciences into open-access online publishing. It’s a well-developed project that will bring a large group of Canadian not-for-profit journals into a library-based publishing system.

Bayne: What are the various resource models for these publishing programs? Have the resource models changed for the digital age?

Hahn: Library publishing services generally are quite new. Basically, they’re starting from scratch. But one thing that came through in our study was that the funding sources are diverse and diversified.

The majority of programs are basing these publishing services pretty squarely within the existing library budget. That works well for a number of reasons. For one thing, as I mentioned earlier, there is a lot of overlap between the expertise and demands of publishing services and the other types of activities that libraries are increasingly engaged in. Digital repositories, digitization activities, various projects that are creating metadata—all these things feed into publishing services. Since library publishing programs are not generally created as separate organizations in the way that, say, a university press would be, there’s no need for a separate, standalone budget for library publishing services. The programs are being constructed in ways that leverage the investments in the library’s other activities.

In addition, the libraries reported a fairly high level of working with partners. So while the library is drawing on its own budget resources, it is also, in many cases, attracting contributions from places such as the campus information technology division or various colleges, departments, and institutes. The libraries are often bringing together resources from different parts of the institution. Libraries also, like publishers, are finding ways to generate revenue and are drawing on grants. Libraries are thinking about whether they can build endowment support for these types of activities and are often seeking additional funding from within the campus.

Another model that libraries are using is to combine resources to cover most of the costs involved with taking over a publication or starting up a publication in the set-up. Then the ongoing, moving-forward costs are substantially less. So sometimes libraries are looking for special funding to help cover the transition, and then they will manage the ongoing maintenance through their own budget. In other instances, they’re seeding the start-up and then looking for revenue to help them with the ongoing maintenance.

Also relevant in this arena is that libraries are doing a lot to keep costs low. Most library publishing services are focusing on electronic-only publishing. They’re working on open access, so they’re not taking on any of the overhead of managing subscriptions and restricting access to registered IPs. They’re also tending to offer very basic services. They’re providing hosting, they’ve got applications that can manage workflows, and they support editors in managing the peer review process, but they’re not doing high-end design work, and they’re not doing copyediting very often. Some library publishing services may offer opportunities to contract out and acquire some of these other services, but they’re focusing on keeping costs very low and then trying to figure out how they can make those costs sustainable, with a diverse array of funding approaches.

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