



## What is a University Press?

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I was having a pretty good week last week, until we got to the closing minutes of play. At that point, I learned that Amsterdam University Press (AUP) had been acquired by the for-profit corporate publishing behemoth Taylor & Francis. This is not really a surprise in some ways. AUP had been transformed into a private, for-profit enterprise in 2019.

So who cares? What's the big deal? Well, I am a big fan of putting my labour where my values are. For some years, I had worked, with Tom Grady, on implementing the Opening the Future model of funding for open access books. It has long been my belief that among the core questions animating the OA books scene is "how [can] scholarly publishing achieve real sustainability for funding OA books?" This model was one suggestion for how revenue streams could be generated that do not rely on exclusionary Book Processing Charges.

Hence, it felt excellent to see Central European University Press (CEUP) and Liverpool University Press take on the model to various degrees, managing to finance at least some OA books without author-facing charges, based on backlist subscriptions that might otherwise be deemed "exhausted". I spent a substantial portion of my time working with these presses to get the model off the ground and demonstrate its viability. I gave many talks in favour of their boldness and outreach. So far so good.

But now, CEUP has been sold to AUP. This happened at some point last year. Described as a "partnership" this involves AUP taking responsibility "for the production, marketing and sales of all titles published by Central European University Press (CEU Press), as well as completing existing projects and commissioning new titles". So, that's, err, "running the press", quite frankly. This looks like some system where CEUP retains the name rights but outsources basically all press operations to AUP (now T&F). A university press in name alone

with the university owning just the brand identity?

But the personal tragedy of this “partnership” for me, now, is that I have given a load of my work and time to Taylor & Francis. It’s tragic whether they use the model, or not. If not, then all that work has gone down the drain; a footnote of historical business models, with years of time invested to no avail (although it’s still in use elsewhere!) If they do use it, then I have handed a tool to the for-profit publishers. I have *very* mixed feelings about that, indeed. Sure, it might result in more open content with a fairer business model, but I am also motivated by curbing the profiteering and extractive impulses of the big publishers. My work has been in the service of creating openness, but now, retrospectively, also in the service of profit.

I am certain that the merger will have taken place for financial reasons. Mostly: the university not wanting to pay to subsidise the UP. We see this kind of threat time and time again, and it’s somewhat sick. Universities clearly symbolically benefit from their presses and the dissemination function that they hold. They are also a fundamental good of scholarship; that universities should assist in the dissemination and review of peer work. But every terrible financialising manager in the district seems to come along and say “hang on, what’s THIS budget line for??” And so we see these “partnerships”.

But why is it fair that universities should be allowed to sell off their presses – for which people like me have done work, using grant funding, without the presses or universities themselves paying – and to convert them to for-profit enterprises? Not-for-profit is, of course, a tax status, not a moral statement (as my friend Geoffrey Bilder consistently reminds me), although charitable status in the United Kingdom is based on an eleemosynary purpose. But universities are thought to have missions to serve the educational public good. And university presses, likewise, are thought to exist for the good of scholarship, not the bolstering of the bottom line. I feel certain that some university press directors that I know might be bristling right now at the purity of that vision – because it’s simply not how it works in reality, of course. If your UP is consistently under-performing financially, most universities will not keep supporting it. But it’s a fine vision for how things *could* be and should be. The university press should be a cost line, not a revenue line.

Dedicated OA aficionados will recognise this as a fundamental problem of *governance*. Without a firm governance contract, it becomes possible for these presses, in theory, to do what they like. The ideal is a strong commitment in the governance contract to not-for-profit publishing, for life (although how you most strongly bind future governance to the conditions of the present is a tricky matter).

But, then, there’s a bigger problem with that grand vision: universities – the entities to which university presses are bound – also don’t work like this. At all. Many of the world’s “top” universities are certainly private, even if not “for-profit”. But some are even the latter. Then there’s even the problem of state ownership hardly being the ideal situation in some cases. Consider the Trump

administration; it's not really great to have universities being run under the control of this state.

The reasons that universities *want* university presses are also problematic. For much of management, they are prestige machines, rather than dissemination vehicles. Having a press is more a status symbol than a commitment to the good of research. As with so much of the contemporary university, so much rests on prestige, the etymology of which is "trick" or "illusion".

To believe in the vision of the university press, you need to be convinced by the vision of the contemporary university. And it's hardly a sure-fire thing. Because university press governance will always be overridden by university governance. The university will also have the last veto say on any action – and that's a huge problem if the university doesn't believe in the point or mission of university presses. They can get the prestige by outsourcing the press name in "partnerships" or outright sales, while bearing none of the financial risk, and making none of the ethical commitment to scholarship that we should here see and that we hope for in the name "university press".

But, then, all in all, this whole scenario makes me sad and angry. To invest so much of my time into something that I felt had some kind of ethical grounding, only to find that now my work will benefit corporate shareholders of Informa Group, is somewhat dispiriting (to put it mildly). It is doubly dispiriting for me right now, because I have terminal kidney failure. We all have a limited time left and no idea when our lives will end, but mine is definitely shorter than I had planned. And I spent some of that time doing work that benefited T&F.

It wasn't all a waste. Of course, the authors who didn't have to find an OA fee have benefited from the openness of the scholarship. The world, likewise, has more OA educational content. But I am left feeling cynical about what is worth doing and just which university presses might be secure in their long-term governance contracts.

What might fix this awful mess? Some kind of university governance contract that specifies what they believe the press is for; the purpose for which they run it; and the promise to shutter it before selling it to a for-profit third-party would be a good start. Indeed, it might be worth thinking of such presses as *infrastructure* and considering adopting the Principles on Open Scholarly Infrastructure, adapted as necessary for a publisher.

In the meantime: if you run a university press or are responsible for one at a university, perhaps now is the time to think what you can do to demonstrate and formally encode the public good of what you are doing. Tie yourself to the mast! Bind yourself contractually to not-for-profit educational purposes and prohibit the major outsourcing of your operations to mega-publishers who damage our library budgets in the service of their shareholders. This is not a plea to end *commercial* operations of university presses – I, more than most, understand the need for revenue and the quest for neutral sustainability driven by distributed and diverse revenue sources – but it is a plea for a new governance deal with

universities, in which the intrinsic good of the press is recognised, and kept in-house, sustainable or not.

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