



# Scholarly publishing in South Africa: the global south on the periphery

This paper highlights the challenges and limitations faced by scholarly presses in South Africa, presenting the business and operational changes required (both individually and collectively) to meet overarching political and competitive pressures. The direct competition of international commercial publishers, a disconnect between national research imperatives and the business model of scholarly presses, and the lack of support for university presses, have perpetuated the knowledge gap between publishing in the 'north' and the 'global south'. Direct engagement with institutions and the state is necessary, as is a robust and confident approach to technology and services, while clarifying and articulating specific needs and aspirations.

'Third World nations are, in a sense, at the periphery of the world system of knowledge, with the industrialized nations at the centre of that system ...'<sup>1</sup>

Philip G Altbach, 1978

## Introduction

In this article the main challenges experienced by university presses based in South Africa are identified, and possible responses and actions we could take, strategies we could engage in and services we require are suggested. I hope to demonstrate the necessity of these for the long-term, sustainable and continued work of university presses in scholarly publishing, writing in my personal capacity as someone invested and involved in the knowledge-production value chain. This paper focuses on the publication of scholarly humanities and social science books, which form the main output of Wits University Press in Johannesburg. I will identify the broad differentiation between scholarly publishers in the 'north' and 'global south' and will then discuss the direct challenges, provide an analysis of the reach of publications, and then how the value of publications is measured. Finally, I will make suggestions of actions local scholarly presses could take. In doing so, I make the following assumptions:

- there is value in having an independent scholarly press, the peer-review process and the broad mission of university presses in striving to publish original, peer-reviewed publications which contribute meaningfully to the development of disciplines and the scholarly exercise in general
- scholarship is not restricted to use in the academy and, as ways of reading and types of knowledge change, the operations of publishers also need to adapt to the changing landscape of knowledge consumption
- the intention of a scholarly press is to provide services necessary to ensure the widest possible reach for scholars and authors with a view to maintaining a sustainable business
- there is continued value in monographs and collected editions for the humanities (whilst ways in which scholarship has changed should be taken into account)<sup>2</sup>
- local is international. The schism between local and international creates a false distinction as locally focused and produced content is as necessary to international scholarship as that produced elsewhere.

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The main challenge in writing this was how to formulate the discrepancy between the scholarly publishing worlds (north and south) and how to present these, in good faith and practically. It would be glib and dishonest to polarize this and present this as an 'us and them' argument. The mechanisms of differentiation are complex and varied, not always consciously or intentionally prejudicial and are filtered through historical and political challenges. This does not, however, imply that there is no differentiation, that the discrepancy is not maintained systematically, nor that the solution is to merely acquiesce to the status quo.

The contribution of commercial scholarly publishers ('north' in my distinction) to the scholarly enterprise has been enormous. Developing technologies, demonstrating reach, contributing to policy developments, are but some of the significant changes introduced. This has led to excellent author services (quicker turnaround times, on-screen editing and proofing systems, reduced errors), production and editorial workflow systems (which have increased profitability and efficiency and distribution that best serve the end user), and increased discoverability and demonstrable usage.

'The contribution of commercial scholarly publishers ... has been enormous'

Unfortunately, the economies of scale and costs of such systems prohibit most university presses from being able to implement the systems they require<sup>3</sup>, let alone in places like South Africa where the substantially reduced funding to universities<sup>4</sup> has impacted heavily on library purchasing power and spend on university presses, compounded by a weakened currency. There are further complexities around the scientific, technical and medical (STM) bias of some indexes as well as the incompatible expectation of comparing humanities and social sciences (HSS) and STM publications in extent, the rate at which research is produced, and the associated measurements and metrics and it is necessary to have a grasp of the overtly political dimension of this.

## Overview and context

Publishing requires a cocktail of skills in practical activities, political and business acumen, and – especially in scholarly publishing – a broad awareness of theoretical/academic developments and trends. While necessary, it is almost impossible for a minimally funded, small and overstretched staff based at a university press to meet this challenge, especially when compared with larger commercial scholarly publishers, who have at their disposal what appear to be limitless resources. The ever-growing complexities and challenges of scholarly publishing are well represented in academic literature and the blog/opinion-piece world. For the most part, though, very few voices of scholarly publishers from the global south are heard in such forums. Even less common are articulations of their intentions, ambitions or needs. Instead, there are outreach programmes, development models and accessibility initiatives devised within business paradigms. The debates and discussions are thus framed and presented without our direct involvement.

'very few voices of scholarly publishers from the global south are heard'

We do, however, experience challenges similar to those faced by university presses in the US and Europe: limited funding, lack of institutional support, an unregulated commercial landscape and the difficulty of functioning within what are seen as moves towards private and increasingly corporatized institutions.

In addition, this is compounded by local institutional competition for rankings and ratings, a lack of coherent policy and action, and the local-focused approach of university presses in South Africa. Further, the varied use of technology, the cost of access to libraries, a lack of engagement with technology, and language/cultural factors are additional factors around which South African university presses must engage. Dulle<sup>5</sup> provides a comprehensive look at reasons for the lack of availability and access of online resources in developing countries. Access challenges are easily translatable as inadequate technology infrastructure, power supply and low levels of information-literacy skill. The complex interplay between these factors has collectively contributed to the global widening gap between publishers.

These factors combined add up to the attractiveness of 'international' publishers to local researchers and perpetuate the vicious cycle that local scholarly publishers are faced with. Three distinctions are, I believe, necessary for a more complete understanding of these issues:

- market reach and widest dissemination
- HSS and STM
- books and journals.

## Market reach and widest dissemination

These terms are generally used interchangeably when referring to university presses in South Africa, but I hope to demonstrate that they represent two approaches to the same challenge and that conflating them has led to a conflict between what university presses see as their mission and what institutions see as the function of the presses. It is becoming increasingly important that publishers recognize their connection to 'research' and involve themselves in the associated mechanisms, while maintaining their independence.

### HSS and STM

Subject/discipline schisms, especially between HSS and STM publishing, exist in terms of funding, output and ascribed value. It is unsurprising that HSS content is often described as being in a state of 'crisis'<sup>6</sup>. South Africa's STM research and patent output is growing and has displayed a strong increase in terms of total number of articles published and impact. HSS publications from South Africa accounted for slightly less of the growth of South African scholarly output, with 1.5% of total world output in 2012<sup>7</sup>.

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### Books and journals

There are vast differences between published products and how they are assessed in terms of cost, return and value, especially between books and journals. Overall, the output of articles from South Africa saw increases in relative impact and total share of papers from 2003 to 2012. The number of scholarly books published through South African institutions increased by 33% in 2013<sup>8</sup>. A negligible number of digital scholarly books were produced in South Africa over this period, and I have thus not considered it as a factor.

## Challenges

### Analysis of the market

The combined output of the scholarly publishers in South Africa is approximately 40 books (on average, based on the Annual Book Publishing Industry Survey by the Publishers Association of South Africa [PASA]<sup>9,10,11</sup>) and 50 journals per year. Around 40 people are employed in this sector nationally. Almost all titles are related to the humanities and social sciences. The isolation experienced and imposed by the South African academy and publishing industry during apartheid has produced an approach to publishing 'for ourselves', and an entire network of distribution and sales, working closely with trade and education publishers, has developed as a result<sup>12</sup>.

'The isolation experienced ... during apartheid has produced an approach to publishing "for ourselves"'

The contestable assumption of the previously mentioned three distinctions is the country of publication. This bears out when compared with figures from PASA for the same period. Scholarly book output made up 1% of the total South African book publishing (print) output consistently for the period 2011–2013, which actually means that there was a steady drop in the number of titles locally produced each year since 2010<sup>13,14,15</sup>.

Therefore, while the criteria for accreditation by the state and the research imperatives of institutions are met very successfully in line with institutional and state policy<sup>16,17</sup>, university presses are under-represented in the 'successful output' initiatives of the state and institutions. One could only deduce from this that the increased scholarly publishing activity in this period is attributable to commercial scholarly (in most cases non-South African) publishers. This could be described as successful in the short term for institutions and individual researchers, but has very serious implications for perpetual access to the content and, closer to this topic, for the future and relevance of scholarly presses.

From this we may infer the following: that the interests of institutions and researchers, nation states and university presses are not, in this instance, aligned or even converged and that the increased activity of commercial scholarly publishers, while helping fulfil national and institutional objectives, is prejudicial to local scholarly presses and long-term research interests.

## Measuring value

Between 3%<sup>18</sup> and 10% of published research is generated by non-G20 countries<sup>19</sup>. While South African output is included in the G20 figures, the complexities around accurately measuring the output of South African scholarly publishers has hopefully been demonstrated in previous sections.

There are several reasons why scholarly publications from South Africa do not enjoy the maximum exposure that they require and deserve: lack of distribution networks, especially in Africa<sup>20</sup>, little or no digital production (and where this *has* been done, it is largely based on direct web access)<sup>21</sup>, inconsistent standards of production, lack of support and engagement with technology and, most importantly, the prohibitive costs of achieving all of this.

As with humanities publishing around the world, bibliometric services and indexes are largely STM focused and as a result the measure of value of the scholarly monograph does not appear to match the sophisticated bibliometrics around (especially STM) journal articles. The extension of both the Web of Science and Scopus to include book content in the last four years is an attempt to check this imbalance, but there are more fundamental questions being asked about the appropriateness and relevance of bibliometrics, the categorization of subjects<sup>22</sup>, the way in which bibliometrics directs research questions<sup>23</sup>, the often confusing multitude of measures<sup>24</sup> and the lack of inclusion of scholarly content published in the global south<sup>25</sup> or even a strong correlation between the GDP of a country and the impact of its journals<sup>26</sup>. Further, the ownership and operation of these bibliometric services and indexes are seen to represent the interests of international capital and thus likely to perpetuate the knowledge gap.

Local academics and researchers interested in ensuring their works are included on international indexes and lists are increasingly taking the decision to publish with non-local scholarly presses. For humanities monographs, this has boosted a co-publishing initiative (in which locally produced research is published with an international partner and then licensed to a local publisher). While it is obviously a complex interaction, it has provided publishers with a practical and feasible *quid pro quo* option, in the absence of alternatives, though several issues remain around attribution and access.

The measure of value, which works neatly in the STM journal article sphere, is thus rather more complex to implement in the humanities. This could perhaps be seen as an opportunity for reasoned contestation and engagement for the South African scholarly community. The Leiden Manifesto<sup>27</sup> represents an interesting shift to expand the narrow definition of 'value'. More rigorous engagement with strategic partners around this is necessary both theoretically and practically. Open access (OA), the development of altmetrics, indexing and discoverability are all strongly linked to the direction this may take.

## What needs to be done?

The suggestions that follow provide a summary of six actions to be undertaken by scholarly publishers from the global south to address the issues above. These follow on very strongly from the five action points by Ngoben<sup>28</sup> and may well be considered to support or augment, rather than replace them. I have described these in broad terms, but there are practical plans being discussed which will be presented separately.

In considering OA and alternative publishing models, the fundamental aims and functioning of the scholarly press must be clear and practically driven. The necessity of developing a workable OA model is beyond question and is a pre-condition to having such a workable programme.

'The necessity of developing a workable OA model is beyond question'

### 1. *Research imperatives: institutional, state, international*

The task remains for scholarly presses (not only in South Africa) to engage with institutional and state research agendas in significant ways; involving themselves in policy development, measures of value (politically and technically) and contesting normative ideas of return on investment. If we are to engage with this model of international scholarly dissemination, the onus is therefore on local publishers to ensure that appropriate services are provided and that the reach and impact of the content at least match those of the larger international scholarly publishers. The responsibility for enabling and facilitating this lies with institutions (universities, the National Research Foundation) and the various organs of state. There is

'There is a need to ... demonstrate the value that a vibrant and sustainable local scholarly publishing industry provides'

66 a need to redefine the 'public sphere' and the expectations of institutions and states, and to demonstrate the value that a vibrant and sustainable local scholarly publishing industry provides.

An important point here is how the 'public sphere' is engaged, especially regarding the rights and obligations of institutions, the state and scholarly presses themselves. This is outside the scope of this article and perhaps warrants a separate study.

## 2. Strategic engagement

South African scholarly presses should engage with national and international organizations that provide the services, information and support best suited to achieving their aims. Not every new service is necessary or useful, but careful attention should be paid to the mission statement, business model and growth plans of the presses. The production of content in appropriate formats and standards should be considered a priority (XML-based content, the use of digital object identifiers [DOIs] through reputable agencies like CrossRef, standardized schemas and DTDs).

We should work closely with standards organizations (COUNTER, the International Digital Publishing Forum [IDPF], metadata-standardizing organizations), discoverability services, indexes, various usage measurement services, and author discovery tools and services such as ORCID. We should do this while actively and critically contributing to the development of these organizations, ensuring that we clearly articulate our interests and needs. Distribution and aggregation agreements should be mutually beneficial and managed; there is no need to expect less than the type of service or agreement offered to any other scholarly publisher anywhere else in the world. These processes have been undertaken nationally by presses in other BRICS countries (Brazil, and China especially) with dramatically increased production, reach and measurable impact observed.

'there is no need to expect less than . . . anywhere else in the world'

## 3. Collaboration

Competitiveness within the South African market does not serve the interest of the university presses, their authors or institutions. The intention of the scholarly press (to attain maximum dissemination) has much been conflated with establishing market dominance. A closer collaboration between university presses, at least for distribution and discoverability, will greatly benefit raising the overall profile of (local) scholarship internationally. More constructive collaboration, with substantive institutional and state support, is required to increase distribution, especially in Africa. This echoes Ngobeni's claim<sup>29</sup> to which little, if anything, has been advanced. The urgency with which this should be addressed cannot be sufficiently stressed.

'More constructive collaboration, with substantive institutional and state support, is required'

## 4. Local is international

The content we publish may have a more overt local focus, but the importance of rigorous scholarship is always valid for scholarship in the wider sense. We should therefore aspire to produce our content in ways that allow the widest possible reach and usage, in Africa and beyond. Careful attention should be paid to the languages we publish in and the skills we encourage.

## 5. Technology

We should engage fully and intelligently with technological and technical developments in the industry. Rapid technical change is part of our reality and a reluctance to fully understand, exploit and challenge technology will only perpetuate the knowledge gap. We need not be overwhelmed by the rate of change, however intimidating it may be. Closer collaboration, skill sharing and robust engagement are required instead, both locally and internationally.

## 6. Social transformation

The transformation of society is a continuous process and publishers must involve themselves in it; from representative staffing, to contributing to skills development, types of content and new ways of distribution. A reticence to engage will only further distance our purpose from changes within and outside the academy. Equally, skills development programmes by various state departments should aim to fulfil the needs of the industry creatively, as has been demonstrated, for instance, by other BRICS countries.

## Conclusion

These challenges are substantial but not insurmountable. It is an opportune time for scholarly presses in South Africa to invest in and participate actively in the development of the measures of value, the augmentations required for indexing HSS content, alternative distribution and access models (especially OA) and funding models for the continued work of scholarly presses. This can be achieved by closer collaboration with local university presses, inter-institutional co-operation and a thorough engagement with state departments and institutions. A more robust and equitable relationship with the larger commercial scholarly publishers and their partners is also necessary. This would not only serve the interest of the university presses themselves but would ultimately lead to a truly international scholarship. Until then, the words of Philip G Altbach<sup>30</sup> from 1978, quoted at the beginning of this article, rather depressingly still ring true.

'These challenges are substantial but not insurmountable'

### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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