

# The university as publisher revisited

This article explores the growing involvement of libraries in providing publishing services for the informal scholarly outputs traditionally referred to as 'gray literature'. By envisioning institutional repository (IR) infrastructure as a publishing platform, libraries can bring conference proceedings, technical reports, niche journals, white papers and other hard-to-source materials into the mainstream. The opportunities of such an approach for scholars, libraries and university presses open to collaboration are considered. Several directions for future expansion of this activity, such as the publication of student scholarship and the development of more formal products linked to gray literature, are suggested.

There is a lot of publishing activity that happens on a university campus, and far from all of it appears in the format of a traditional book or journal article. In 2006, a Task Force on University Publishing at the University of California (UC), co-chaired by leaders of the university press and California Digital Library, found over 300 organizations with publishing programs on UC's ten campuses, most operating in isolation.<sup>1</sup> While the scale of the California system is unusual and no inventory as formal as this appears to have been attempted at other higher education institutions, it is clear to many publishers whose home happens to be on the university campus that they are surrounded by a great deal of publishing activity that operates outside traditional networks.

What does this activity consist of? While the UC survey found several well-developed publishing programs producing peer-reviewed monographs and periodicals, less formal outputs are more common. Conference proceedings, technical reports, white papers and niche journals are all typical of a class of material that is familiar to librarians as 'gray literature'. Lacking the identifiers that enable discovery, difficult to source through the traditional supply chain, and often either print-only or hosted on servers that are constantly shifting their addresses, this type of content represents a perennial acquisition challenge to library professionals.

While some gray literature may be of marginal interest, there is also a great deal of important work within this class. In the US, the results of hundreds of millions of dollars in federally funded research are often only presented in technical reports. And, especially in applied technology fields, conference proceedings may well be the place where scholars will learn of new approaches or discoveries first. For the amount of time they invest in them, scholars are also poorly rewarded for their gray literature publications, partly because these generally fall outside the indexes (such as the Thomson Reuters citation reports) which universities use to measure faculty achievement.

Librarians have long been aware of the gray literature problem and an increasing number (especially in North America) are finding rich opportunities to repurpose the institutional repository (IR) infrastructure they have invested in to provide a publication venue. The costs of publishing technical reports, white papers or proceedings have often already been covered by grants or conference registration income. The fact that most repository software (DSpace, Fedora, Digital Commons, for example) lacks robust systems for managing subscriptions or collecting money is therefore not a problem, and these materials can be presented open access. The central challenges of discoverability, organization, stable hosting and preservation are addressed by the existing underpinnings



CHARLES  
WATKINSON

Director, Purdue  
University Press and  
Head, Scholarly  
Publishing Services  
Purdue University  
Libraries  
USA

"... 'gray literature'  
... represents a  
perennial acquisition  
challenge to library  
professionals."

182 of repository systems. And an increased emphasis within the repository community on altmetrics, which measure use in contexts outside the narrow bounds of the academy, aligns well with the interests of authors of gray literature in showing 'impact' of their work beyond the impact factor. Mentions on the open web, in social media posts, in major news publications and blogs, are all trackable by altmetric systems such as Altmetric.com, ImpactStory and Plum Analytics.<sup>2</sup>

The inaugural, 2014, edition of the *Library Publishing Directory* demonstrates that the 115 libraries listed are now providing online hosting for hundreds of thousands of technical reports, a number only slightly behind the Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) which is probably the largest body of content in IRs.<sup>3</sup> Other types of content that the library publishers report producing include niche journals, white papers and conference proceedings. The expansion of this body of discoverable gray literature was discussed extensively at the first meeting of the Library Publishing Coalition held in Kansas City, MO, in March 2014.<sup>4</sup>

"... the impact of resurrecting these hidden bodies of relevant literature can be immense .."

At the broad survey level, the importance of the growth of original publishing through IRs may be hard to recognize. Library publishing still accounts for a small portion of the annual research output. However, for certain communities of scholars and practitioners, the impact of resurrecting these hidden bodies of relevant literature can be immense, as the following case study of the usage of transportation literature shows.

At Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, librarians working with staff from the University Press have digitized over 1,500 technical reports from the Joint Transportation Research Program (JTRP) and have put in place a workflow for the review, production and dissemination of around 30 new reports per year.<sup>5</sup> These publications have been placed on Purdue e-Pubs, an IR built on the Digital Commons platform from Berkeley Electronic Press that offers sophisticated manuscript management and activity measurement capabilities. COUNTER-compliant statistics show that the JTRP reports were downloaded over 250,000 times in 2013 by users in over 200 countries and usage is growing steadily (see Figure 1). The international spread of usage shows that even though the focus of these publications was on solving transportation issues in the State of Indiana, the research presented has global relevance.<sup>6</sup> JTRP receives over US\$5 million of funding a year, mostly originating in federal funding distributed through state agencies. The types of metrics supplied by the repository have proved valuable evidence for return on investment, and the easy way in which even older reports can now be discovered through services such as Google Scholar reduce the risk of duplication of research that has raised concern among senior US administration officials.

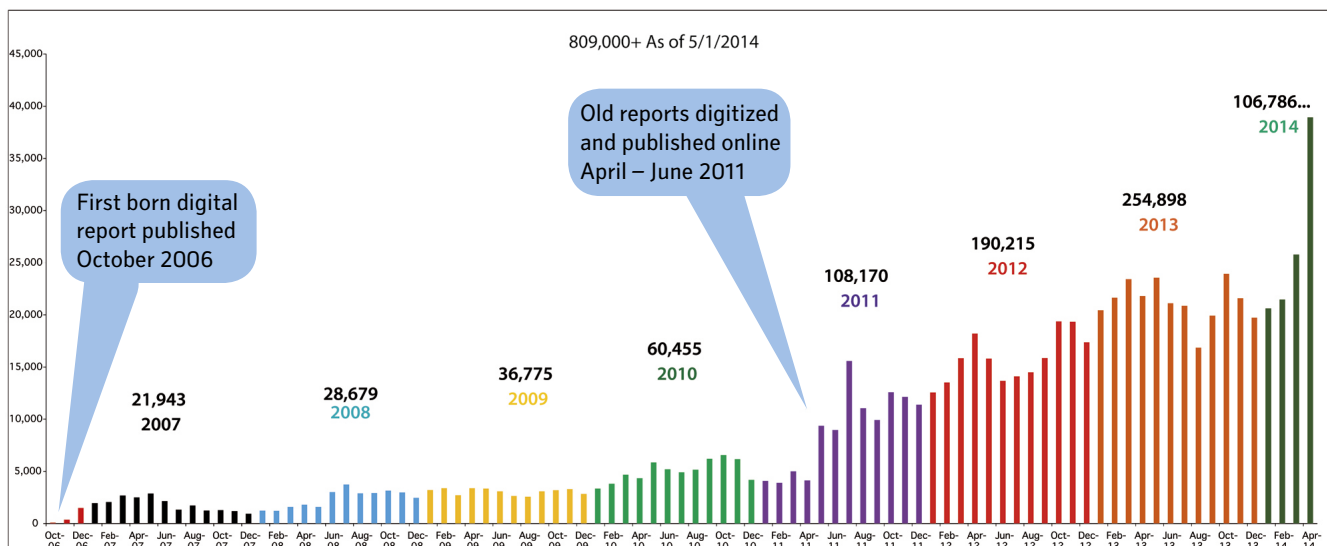


Figure 1. JTRP Technical Report downloads from Purdue e-Pubs from inception of the collection, end of October 2006, to end of April 2014

183 The success of the JTRP experiment was one of the major impetuses in the creation of a unified libraries publishing division at Purdue in 2012, which extended the activities of Purdue University Press to also include the provision of services to publication initiatives on campus. The staff responsible for Purdue e-Pubs now report to a single individual designated as 'Director of Purdue University Press and Head of Scholarly Publishing Services, Purdue University Libraries'. While the two-part title is a bit of a tongue-twister, it accurately represents the bipartite responsibilities of the publishing division and avoids brand erosion and confusion. On the one hand, the Press imprint is reserved for peer-reviewed books and journals, selected by a formal Editorial Board, and published with a high level of editorial and design intervention to advance knowledge in specific disciplinary communities. On the other, Scholarly Publishing Services provides a 'white labeled' option for centers on campus who wish to retain their own publishing imprints but outsource the publishing process (see Figure 2 for a graphical representation of this 'spectrum' approach).<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2. A spectrum of publishing services provided under the imprints of Purdue University Press and Scholarly Publishing Services

As well as being beneficial to the centers, departments and individual scholars who trust their publishing to Scholarly Publishing Services, the collaboration between the Library and University Press at Purdue is helpful to both partners. The Press is able to provide more tangible benefits to its host institution, while the Libraries strengthen their reputation as service providers to faculty, not just stewards of bought and licensed collections. In North America only around 100 university presses serve the needs of over 2,500 four-year colleges, and the existence of a university press is neither assumed nor necessary for campus-based publishing to develop. However, involving press staff in such institutional initiatives enables quicker development of the skills, processes and relationships that are needed. Over 27% of the members of the Association of American University Presses who describe themselves as university presses now report to the heads of libraries, a number that has dramatically increased over the last five years. Engaging with the gray literature problem offers a particular opportunity to these publishing partnerships.

A growing area of interest for library publishers is in student scholarship. Research universities are increasingly emphasizing early exposure to 'real world' experiences for undergraduate students and investing in ways of improving their employability. The result is that original content is being developed through activities such as undergraduate research and service-learning, and publication opportunities are needed. Library publishers can provide a tangible output from the students' investment in college, valuable for showing graduate schools and employers. At the same time, librarians can insert instruction in information literacy and scholarly communication into the publication process, encouraging the scholars of tomorrow to be savvy contract negotiators and ethical authors. Annual assessments of the impact of the *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research* (<http://www.jpur.org>) since 2011 have shown substantial learning gains for students involved in this project.<sup>8</sup>

"Libraries ... service providers to faculty, not just stewards of bought and licensed collections."

184 Concurrent with the survey of publishing needs at UC, mentioned at the start of this article, researchers at the Ithaka organization were conducting the work that led to the influential 2007 report, *University Publishing in a Digital Age*.<sup>9</sup> This call to action identified 'a pressing and urgent need to revitalize the university's publishing role and capabilities in this digital age.' The authors of the report argued that 'a renewed commitment to publishing in its broadest sense can enable universities to more fully realize the potential global impact of their academic programs, enhance the reputations of their specific institutions, maintain a strong voice in determining what constitutes important scholarship and which scholars deserve recognition, and in some cases reduce costs.' In the years following the Ithaka report, some disillusionment developed in libraries about the success of early investments in developing publishing programs. For example, although 55% of the North American libraries who responded to a 2012 survey reported that they were either developing or implementing publishing programs, the majority of these were of an extremely small scale.<sup>10</sup>

"... a quieter revolution was in fact taking place ..."

The original library publishing programs were usually developed with ambitious but ill-defined aims around restructuring the whole scholarly communications system, usually related to providing a challenge to commercial dominance of the periodicals market. Because they did not live up to this promise, library publishing operations somewhat dropped out of view. However, it could be suggested that a quieter revolution was in fact taking place, more accurately attuned to the real needs of scholars and other campus communities for a solution to their gray literature issues. While this activity is currently complementary to that of other players in the publishing ecosystem, the trusted relationships formed on campus in handing technical reports, conference proceedings, etc. offer interesting potentials for library publishers, especially those working in collaboration with university presses, to 'move up the value chain'. Publishing books, journals and other more formal types of publication that include rich links to both traditional gray literature and the data sets that have received similar neglect would be a logical extension of the current activity. Perhaps the time of the university as publisher is finally coming!

#### References

1. Candee, C H and Withey, L, *Publishing Needs and Opportunities at the University of California*. Report of the SLASAC Task Force, 2007, Los Angeles: University of California: [http://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/groups/files/slasiac/docs/Publishing\\_Task\\_Force\\_DRAFT\\_18\\_Oct\\_07.pdf](http://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/groups/files/slasiac/docs/Publishing_Task_Force_DRAFT_18_Oct_07.pdf) (accessed 21 May 2014).
2. Konkiel, S and Scherer, D, New Opportunities for Repositories in the Age of Altmetrics, *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 2013, 39(4), 22–26: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/bult.2013.1720390408>
3. Lippincott, S, *Library Publishing Directory 2014*, 2014, Atlanta, Library Publishing Coalition: <http://www.librarypublishing.org>
4. The proceedings of the conference will be reported in Davis-Kahl, S and Schlosser, M, eds. *Library Publishing*, Special Issue of the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*, forthcoming November 2014.
5. Newton, M P, Bullock, D M, Watkinson, C, Bracke, P J and Horton, D K, Engaging New Partners in Transportation Research, *Transportation Research Record*, 2012, 2291(1), 111–123: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3141/2291-13>
6. A short video created by the Joint Transportation Research Program illustrates the global impact of their reports compellingly, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284315344> (accessed 21 May 2014).
7. Scherer, D and Purple, K, The Best of Both Worlds: Creating a Continuum of Publishing Services for Purdue University. Poster presented at the Library Publishing Forum, Kansas City, MO, March 2014: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/2162-3309/lpf.1016> (accessed 21 May 2014).
8. Weiner, S A and Watkinson, C, What Do Students Learn from Participation in an Undergraduate Research Journal? Results of an Assessment, *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*, 2(2), 2014: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/2162-3309.1125> (accessed 22 May 2014).
9. Brown, L, Griffiths, R J, Rascoff, M and Guthrie, K, *University Publishing in a Digital Age*, 2007, New York, Ithaka: <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/university-publishing-digital-age> (accessed 21 May 2014).
10. Mullins, J L, Rust, C M, Ogburn, J L, Crow, R, Ivins, O, Mower, A and Watkinson, C, *Library Publishing Services: Strategies for Success: Report on a Research Project Conducted by the Libraries of Purdue University, Georgia Institute of Technology, and University of Utah*, 2012 Washington, DC, Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition. Accessible at: [http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/purduepress\\_ebooks/24/](http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/purduepress_ebooks/24/) (accessed 21 May 2014).

**Article copyright: © 2014 Charles Watkinson. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](#), which permits unrestricted use and distribution provided the original author and source are credited.**



Charles Watkinson

Director, Purdue University Press and Head, Scholarly Publishing Services

Purdue University Libraries, Stewart Center, Rm 370, 504 W. State Street, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907, USA

Tel: (765) 494-8251 | E-mail: [ctwatkin@purdue.edu](mailto:ctwatkin@purdue.edu)

ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9453-6695>

To cite this article:

Watkinson, C, The university as publisher revisited, *Insights*, 2014, 27(2), 181–185; DOI:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/2048-7754.131>