

ARTICLE

## Publishing the Public Humanities

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### Abstract

This article argues that university presses are key partners in supporting and promoting the public humanities. The article offers numerous examples.

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How can works in the public humanities actually reach the public? While the peer-reviewed articles and books scholars need to build academic careers mainly reach other scholars, public humanists also want their publications to engage broader communities. Who can they partner with to turn the beautiful diversity of public humanities activity – conversation groups, lecture and film series, exhibits, oral history interviews, community photography projects, collaborative websites, and much more – into books designed and marketed to fulfill both goals?

Your key partners in all of this will be university presses. Maybe you're thinking no, university presses only reach scholars. You can't usually find their books at your local bookstore, or they're hidden on shelves in the back instead of heaped in beautiful stacks up front with the bestsellers. They rarely get reviewed in the few remaining major book reviews. Doesn't making the case for the public relevance of the humanities require publishing with the big commercial presses, or at least the biggest of the big scholarly presses?

No.

First, university presses have a long, deep, and persistent commitment to publishing and circulating works in the humanities. Though often small and rarely deep-pocketed, they are mission-driven, not-for-profit enterprises closely aligned with the values and aims of humanities scholars. You won't need an agent to get your foot in the door and you won't need to persuade them that regional and local readers matter too. Partially shielded from market imperatives, university presses are often willing to take chances and experiment with challenging topics or alternative genres and formats. As Neema Avashia, author of *Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place*, says: "I could come to you

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[West Virginia University Press] with some fairly untraditional ideas, and they were really welcomed. This isn't a thing I always hear from authors at Big 5 [commercial] houses."<sup>1</sup> Two examples: the University of Wisconsin Press launched its *Living Out: Gay and Lesbian Autobiographies* in the 1990s, years before broad support for LGBTQ people emerged in the United States, and the University of Iowa Press supports a forum for multivocal, slow-gestating, and often experimental books about doing community-engaged projects in the *Humanities and Public Life* series.

Second, university presses are already doing the work of making the humanities and humanities scholarship not just publicly accessible but publicly appealing. University presses publish popular histories and regional fiction and poetry, books that thousands of people want to read – just not enough thousands to make them financially viable for a large (or even a small) commercial publisher. This decades-long commitment to supporting regional humanities practice means university presses are often familiar, trusted resources for the publics that scholars want to reach. So many examples: The University of Georgia's New South Books imprint, the University Press of Kentucky's Screen Door Press, McGill-Queens University Press's Harbinger Poetry Series, Wayne State University Press's *Made in Michigan* Writers Series, the University of Alberta's Robert Kroetsch Series, the University of Iowa Press's *Iowa and the Midwest Experience*, the University of Arizona Press's *Camino del Sol*, Oregon State University Press's *Northwest Readers*, Athabasca University Press's *Canadian Plays*, and many, many more.

Or consider the University of Guam Press, which dedicates itself to creating and publishing educational resources by and for the people of the island and all of Micronesia. In addition to scholarly books, it publishes literature that translates the distinctive Micronesian storytelling tradition to the page. The press provides much-needed locally written K-12 teaching materials and audiobooks recorded in CHamoru,<sup>2</sup> the language of the Indigenous people of Guam. Other university presses, including Nebraska, Oklahoma, Washington, and Toronto, have long published essential resources like dictionaries and grammars for Indigenous communities who are breathing life into languages nearly suffocated by colonialism.

Third, university presses frequently partner with their local, state, and regional cultural organizations such as libraries, museums, historical societies, and botanical gardens and parks, as well as state humanities councils in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Chances are, if you're a humanities scholar looking for ways to engage with the public, you'll be working with or building on programming at these institutions too. These existing relationships make it easier to fund, create, and circulate works for broad audiences outside the university. And as nonprofits, university presses can apply for or be contributing partners on grants. Two examples: West Virginia Classics, a partnership between the state's humanities council and its university press that brought the state's literary classics back into print with new scholarly introductions, and Ohio State University Press's *Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio*, which grew out of a statewide project to collect the stories of Ohioans affected by the opioid epidemic.<sup>4</sup> This is a project by and for the people of this place, the people hardest hit by the scourge of addiction, and it exemplifies the essential role of the humanities in a public health crisis.

<sup>1</sup> Krissoff, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> The two initial capitals are preferred by the University of Guam Press.

<sup>3</sup> Cocks, Demers, Miller, and Sanfilippo 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Cocks et al. 2021.

Fourth, university presses frequently work with local and regional independent bookstores, another key partner in making the humanities public. The indies, as they're fondly known, are deeply rooted in and committed to entertaining and educating their communities.<sup>5</sup> Presses know where these stores are and who arranges events at them; presses know how to make sure the books are there and someone else is taking care of the selling while your event is happening. If the public you're trying to reach includes your neighbors, chances are they already know and love the nearby indie bookstore. If you're committed to buying local, why not publish local too?

Fifth, university presses have been at the forefront of efforts to publish digital multimedia works, often hand-in-hand with university libraries. These bespoke, sometimes large-scale projects require a lot of experimentation and labor with the certainty of no return on investment. No commercial publisher can take on such a project. But university presses and libraries can partner with you on grants, contribute peer review and project management, and help you think through intellectual property, cultural sensitivity, privacy, and preservation issues.<sup>6</sup> Why will they do so? Because they share your values and your enthusiasm for the power for good inherent in the humanities.

I offer three examples with interestingly different models. Brown University's Digital Publications program supports its faculty in developing their projects and then brokers a publication agreement with a university press. Ravenspace, developed by UBC Press in partnership with the University of Washington Press and other organizations, provides a platform for Indigenous studies projects that incorporates both Indigenous protocols and academic peer review. The University of Michigan Press uses its Fulcrum platform to publish open access e-books enhanced with audio, video, and maps, enabling works like Danielle Fosler-Lussier's *Music on the Move* to reach a broad audience.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, university presses face challenges unique to their precarious, semi-commercial business model. Much about that model is in question as more research funders mandate open access and as digital technologies offer new opportunities to reconceive what gets published and how. Yes, university presses, as essential infrastructure for the humanities,<sup>8</sup> face the same challenges as researchers and teachers in the humanities. And yes, they are ready to work hand-in-hand with you to turn those challenges into testaments to the centrality of the humanities to human creativity and well-being.

**Catherine Cocks** is the Director of Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY, USA, and has worked in scholarly publishing for more than twenty years. She is the Co-Editor of *Feeding the Elephant*, an H-Net blog focused on humanities and social sciences publishing.

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<sup>5</sup> Caine 2023; Deutsch 2022; Doyle 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, Hanson, and Verhoff 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Fosler-Lussier 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Watkinson and Pitts 2021.

**Competing interests.** I have worked in scholarly publishing since 2002 and at university presses since 2011. Among the presses mentioned in this piece are those at Iowa, Washington, Michigan State, and Syracuse universities; I have held positions at all of them and currently work at Syracuse. I worked on the Humanities and Public Life series and the Iowa and the Midwest series (both at the University of Iowa Press) from 2011 to 2016. I was a member of the Publishing and the Publicly Engaged Humanities Working Group, which was convened by the National Humanities Alliance in partnership with Routledge/Taylor & Francis. I am a member of the editorial board of *Public Humanities*.

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