Kenneally: As a species in publishing, the university press is the long-lived progeny of hybridization – the academic paired with the popular. The world’s first university press, at Cambridge University in the UK, opened in 1534 and remains a thriving operation as it approaches its sixth century.

Welcome to CCC’s podcast series. I’m Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Examples of the scholarly and the successful abound from university press catalogs. *Interaction of Color*, from Yale University Press, a handbook for artists and art lovers by Yale professor Josef Albers, has sold more than a quarter of a million copies since it first appeared 60 years ago. In a publishing environment buffeted by digital disruption and calls for open access, university presses in 2024 must manage to remain relevant and sustainable even as their audiences grow.

At Dartmouth College earlier this month, Princeton University Press Director Christie Henry joined colleagues from MIT Press and the University of Michigan to explore with students, faculty, and librarians the ways that UPs are keeping up with the changes. Christie Henry joins me now from the Princeton University campus with more. Welcome to the program, Christie Henry.

Henry: Thanks so much, Chris. It’s great to be here. And a chance to talk about my favorite species of publisher and favorite species of publishing book.

Kenneally: We’re very happy you can join us, Christie. I think we should start with a question about the mission of university presses and how the mission influences the work that gets published and the press’s business model.

Henry: Yeah, that’s a great way to start, because it’s very much our DNA. Our mission is our compass is the way I like to think about it. It’s like having a through line or a narrative that informs all of our decision-making and that we always have to point back to. We’re seeking books that impact, that engage. And while we also need them to sell – some of them, at least, to sell – because we’re trying to run fiscally responsible businesses, we have
an underlying commitment to global impact, to the world of ideas, and to make sure that knowledge is shared, and especially peer-reviewed knowledge.

What our not-for-profit status does and what this mission does is empowers us and enables us to work with more than just a market input. It works with an impact input. So when we’re making decisions, we’re both looking at the fiscal plans and impact, but we’re really looking at the content, too, and what that’s going to do for the world of ideas and knowledge. It’s a very fortunate position to be in.

KENNEALLY: Christie Henry, can you describe the relationship of the university press to the university?

HENRY: (laughter) I can’t do it in a singular way, Chris, which is really interesting. I think it’s one of the best things about the university press ecosystem. We have all sorts of types of university presses. We’re diverse in a lot of ways. We are not as diverse as we need to be in terms of the staff and the leadership, and that’s something that the community has really been tenaciously and actively working on, as are many presses, as the Lee & Low survey has just prompted us again to remind that we need to do more work.

But the university presses’ structures within university campuses really vary, as do our business models. Some are reporting departments of universities. Others are independent. Princeton University Press is independent and affiliated. More than 50% of university presses now report into libraries, which has been a significant change over the years, and certainly from the time that Cambridge was started, as you say, and when Princeton joined the community in 1905. Princeton is a press that does not publish journals, but there are a lot of university presses that publish journals, also adding to the diversity of the community. There are new publishers coming online. Brown University, for example, is doing born digital.

So collectively, we form this really vibrant ecosystem, and we do so in a way, because I think we are heterogeneous in our approach and in our relationships to those universities. Ideally, we have a symbiotic relationship with the university, no matter what the reporting line is. And when that symbiosis or synergy doesn’t exist, that’s when the real challenges have arisen for university presses.

KENNEALLY: Who are the audiences in 2024 for university presses?

HENRY: Yeah, we like to think they’re as broad as they have been – and in fact, broadening all the time. There’s the pedagogical audience, both the students and the faculty. There are generalists. Many university presses are publishing for an avid general reader or publishing works that engage regional audiences. That might be cookbooks. That might
be travel guides. There are many presses that publish for naturalists. Princeton happens to be one of them. It’s a really wonderful list for us, the Princeton Nature list. Some are publishing for the earliest scholars, we like to say. MIT has a great relationship with Candlewick, for example, where they publish for kids. So when you can get those habits formed at the earliest of ages, that’s a wonderful thing for university presses. We’re not all in the children’s space yet, but a number of us are dabbling in more graphic works, which you and I have talked about, and hoping we can engage more.

So we like to think about any reader who’s interested in ideas. Many of the works do skew to those who are interested in academic ideas, but it’s always our goal to make sure that we’re broadening the bridge between the academy and readers the world over.

KENNEALLY: Christie Henry, what role does peer review have in determining the published titles?

HENRY: Absolutely everything, Chris. To be in the Association of University Presses, a publisher has to demonstrate that they have a peer-review process, and that peer review culminates in some sort of presentation and review by an editorial board. So there’s something actually foundational about peer review in our membership model and in the community.

But I think much more substantively than that, peer review is what we bring as an imprimatur. In this environment now, where it’s really hard to discern the lines between truths and non-truths and hypotheticals and reals, the peer-reviewed foundation of everything we publish I think leads to the integrity that the world is really needing, and can for readers be that compass. Just as much as the mission is our compass, peer review can for readers point them to something that they know is of an integrity. So we spend a lot of time and a lot of resource. It’s also a critical way that we connect to communities is through peer reviews.

It’s not a perfect system. There are a lot of publications around where there are imperfections and biases in the peer-review process. So I’m not here to advocate that it’s in a perfect state. But it really does define, I think, one of the core strengths of university presses. And I’ve seen in over 30 years now watching the peer review at work how much it improves manuscripts and really brings out the best in authors and the best in books and journals.

KENNEALLY: Where are university presses found around the world?

HENRY: There are university presses in now over 17 countries that are members of the Association of University Presses. The total count of university presses in the world is
much more significant than that, but many of them are not members of the AU Presses because of this aspect of demonstrating peer review. Some presses in other countries – for example, Argentina, where I’ve spent some time meeting with university presses – they’re still in a state of more working in the service of the university and not publishing authors from other universities – so really taking university faculty and publishing all of their works, rather than having an independent publishing decision-making process. It’s our hope that more and more presses will bring peer review to the foundation and join in the spirit and mission of the Association of University Presses. And we have seen an increase globally. The organization is really working purposefully and thoughtfully to engage presses into a network. It’s a great resource and a community of collaboration.

KENNEALLY: Christie Henry, is the monograph an endangered species?

HENRY: I would say it’s an evolving species, Chris. It has to adapt, right? It has to adapt to a changing environment. And if it doesn’t successfully, then like any biological species, it will face some challenges. It’s certainly been referred to as an endangered species for the entire time I’ve been in publishing. What’s causing the endangerment has changed over a number of years. It still represents 50% of university press publishing. So that shows – in any ecological community, if it’s half of the community, there’s some resilience there, and I think that’s what we focus on.

Teaching has changed. Fewer books are assigned in classes. Fewer faculty are incorporating books into curricula. We’re seeing that. We’re all battling an attentional economy that doesn’t work in favor of monographs that are 350 pages or 800 pages long. So the adaptation is real, and the challenge is real. And the costs of monographs are – there have been some economies of scale, but it’s not inexpensive to do a book right. It involves a big team. It involves lots of collaborations. It is still one of the most critical and enduring ways of making sure that research and scholarship exists in a durable way. So we spend a lot of time advocating for those monographs and making sure that they still have oxygen in the ecosystem and that they’re still powering a lot of what we do. I think that will be the case. They’re fundamental to the way universities operate in terms of recruiting and retention and promotion. So there is a sort of co-evolution and co-adaptation.

However, we have to think about – how do they operate in the ecology and economy today? There are monographs in areas where the research is much more visual and in audio and dramatic realms. So a print page doesn’t satisfy all of the needs of bringing those fields and that scholarship into durable book form. We’ve had to think about how to really flex what a monograph is. It still remains a work of substantial and substantive scholarly research. That will, I think, remain at the backbone of monographs. And we’re
working to keep them. We need conservation programs, just like we do other endangered species. And university presses have them.

KENNEALLY: Tell me about the Princeton University Press’s publishing fellowship program.

HENRY: I’m so glad you asked about this, Chris. We have learned so much from these fellows who have joined us over the last few years. Our fellowship program started as part of a larger-scale equity and inclusion strategic initiative that we launched in 2018, thankfully with support of our board of trustees, and with considerable resources to put into it to really promote change and prompt change. And the fellows were one of the ways we were responding to the data we were getting from the whole of the publishing community. For example, I mentioned Lee & Low earlier, and they’ve just released the latest survey. Publishing is not inclusive fully or fully representative, and university presses are not immune to that.

So the fellows were a chance for us to bring colleagues from historically excluded and underrepresented areas into publishing to spend a year with those fellows, have them teach us and enable us to teach them about publishing, and it’s been a really phenomenal program. We’ve actually just finished recruiting our fourth-year cohort. We’ll have one fellow working in sustainability and another working in international rights. We’ve also had some wonderful fellowship exchanges with the Library of America, some of the other programs that are working in similar mission and goal with fellowships.

This lived experience that’s brought to the press teaches us all. It’s part of our own evolution. And we try to build in that lived experience from the very start of the fellowship program so that fellows tell us about the role of story and their own lived experience, and they tell us about what’s meaningful for their colleagues to know about them. So it sort of upends the conventional application process from the start.

We also have the past fellows help us to select the fellows for each new year. So there’s a chance for those fellows to learn about the recruitment and interview process as part of professional development. We’re always thinking about how do we make the most out of these initiatives in terms of group learning? And we also give the fellows the chance to write about their experience and be published on our ideas blog, which again is an opportunity for them and an opportunity for us to learn from their experiences.

So we’re really excited about it. It was a five-year program, and I very much hope we can continue it beyond those five years. We’ve had a great group that has gone out into the world of publishing after their time here at Princeton.
KENNEALLY: Christie Henry, how does a book like *Slouch: Posture Panic in America*, just published by Princeton University Press, reflect the titles that university presses publish in 2024?

HENRY: OK, Chris. The moment I mention the title *Slouch*, I sit up, which has been happening since we introduced Beth Linker’s project to our first collective conversation about it. To me, it’s absolutely one of those exciting and exemplary university press books, and I was thrilled to see Rebecca Mead pick it up in *The New Yorker* this week and talk about we much we learn from this kind of history. I also want to point you to – we have a great animated asset that our creative media lab created where the slouching figure on the cover actually straightens up – so a fun way to animate our whole teams.

But this is a work that started with really rigorous scholarship of documents, photographs of college students and their postures, and makes this broad synthetic connection between the way we’ve thought about posture, including posture panics, and how it links areas of study of history, of science, of race, ability studies, and it’s all done in a narrative form that aims to make sure that this history is illuminated for more than the academy. I think about these general-interest books. Monographs light up particular buildings on a campus. General-interest books light up and radiate far beyond campuses. This is just one of those books. It builds that bridge between scholarly research, and really rigorous and provocative research, and the wider public. And something like *The New Yorker* engagement, when there’s an excerpt in *Time*, those demonstrate that it’s working. It’s really resonant.

For those of us who were raised in the ’70s, it teaches us why we may have walked around with books on our head, a phenomenon you don’t see as much anymore. But it’s just why university presses exist and just the kind of book that we want entrusted to us.

KENNEALLY: Christie Henry, director of the Princeton University Press, thanks so much for speaking with me today.

HENRY: Thanks so much, Chris, for having me, and thanks for making time for Read UP. We all appreciate it.

KENNEALLY: That’s all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and you can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I’m Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me.

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