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**REQUEST FOR COMMENT:  
DISCUSSING THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
IN THE UNIVERSITY**

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Mediterranean Region: National Contexts and International Experiences  
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*Abstract*

Many European university presses were born in the 1990s out of the spirit of self-organization of the HSS community facing growing publication needs and unacceptable constraints by commercial publishers. Shrinking budgets in university libraries and exploding subscription fees added to what became known as the “publication crisis”.

After more than a decade of practical experiences with European university presses, the time has come to join forces and to aim beyond the first-aid solutions of the *Gründerzeit*. Focusing on the French case and arguing from the view point of a “digital native”, this talk will stress the importance of commenting and collaboration practices for the future of Academia. University presses can play an important role in this development, but in order to do so, they need to tackle three major issues: 1. Quality management and thematic specialization; 2. Consistent training of university staff and the reinforcement of experimental publishing; 3. International credibility and multilingualism.

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Dear colleagues,

As you might know, I am supposed to replace Jean Kempf on this panel, the director of Lyon university press. Please forgive me if I will not even try to do so: Mr Kempf has been in business for 25 years, he has published extensively on the subject and he is deeply involved in opening up the somewhat ossified French institutional landscape. Obviously, it would be difficult for me to fill his shoes. To be honest, I'm not even French. Whether I'm Mediterranean or not depends on whether or not you accept Angela Merkel's enlarged interpretation of the Mediterranean Union.

I'm very happy that you're granting me *droit de cité* under these circumstances. My talk will be short and it will be the talk of an amateur – I will simply bring up some remarks from the point of view of an observer who *is* working on media change and experimental publishing, but not necessarily *within* the university. I hope to raise some points for further discussion during this round table – and that's about it.

Why did I add Request for Comments to Mr Kempf's initial title? It seems to me that when we discuss the future of academia and the role of the university presses, it is useful to stress the importance of formalized procedures for commenting and collaboration. The *Request For Comments* was and still is, apart from his specific role in the creation of internet standards, the constantly repeated inaugural act of Science.

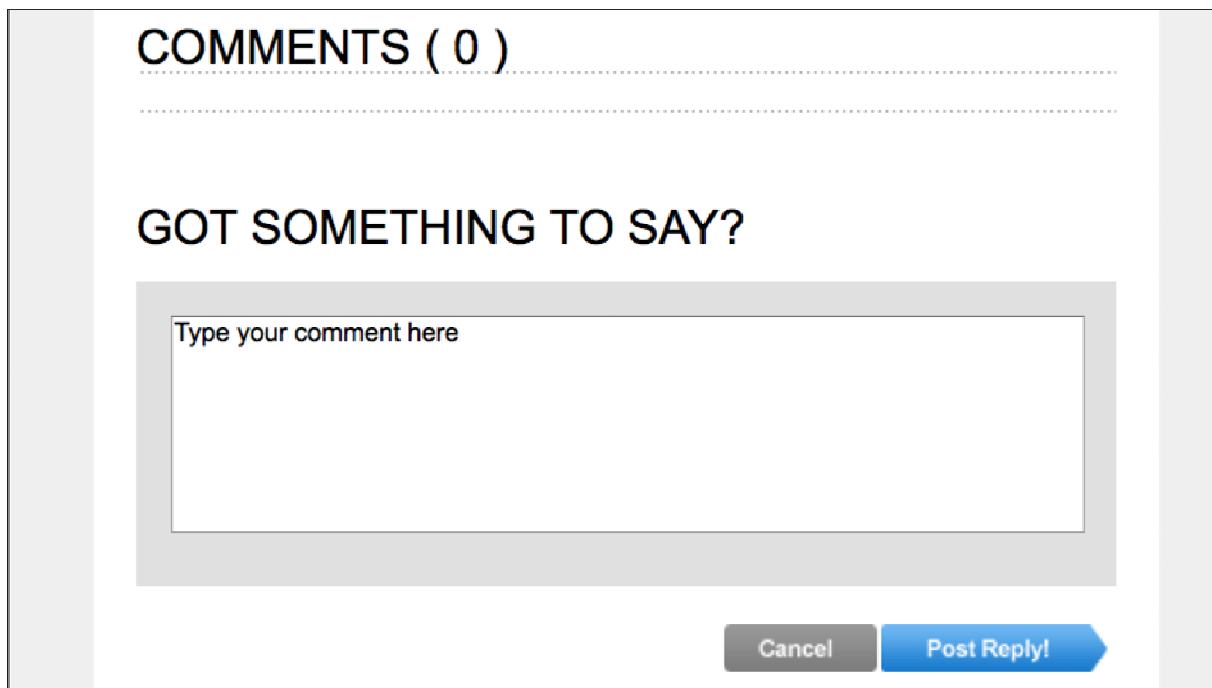
This may be seen as a truism. But it is not trivial to take deliberation as the pivotal point for scientific activity. Under the current conditions, there are at least two problems with this approach.

*First problem:* With the rise of the publish or perish paradigm, deliberation has been subsumed under a productivist logic. Quite often, we as researchers – and especially as young researchers – expect from even minor contributions, comments, etc., that they “pay off”. And the easiest way to do so is a journal article, or, under certain conditions, even a monograph. In many cases, they might not have an intrinsic necessity to be published *in this form* and the content could have also been exposed in a different, more convenient way, and a lot of young scholars would even prefer to do so, but: Oral discussions, seminar activities, non academic articles, research blog

entries etc. don't "pay off". This is a structural problem of the university system and it has to be distinguished from the fact that the European University Presses are doing an important job by publishing books which, for strictly commercial reasons, are not or no longer accepted by For Profit publishers.

So my first remark would be that one cannot conceive a successful relation between the university press and the university without pushing the Scientific Community – especially the formal recruitment bodies – to accept and encourage discursive, community-oriented and non-academic, non peer-reviewed publication activities, especially but not only, in the Humanities and the social sciences. If it is true that we are witnessing an epistemological shift from the *intra muros* based model of the diffusion of academic knowledge to a system which Gérard Wormser, the director of our research group at the Maison des Sciences de l'homme Paris Nord and the editor of *Sens public*, calls the *editorial model* of the humanities (*l'éditorialisation des sciences humaines*), then the university system needs to find solutions to break the publish or perish spiral. The *conditio sine qua non* for the future of exciting, vivid university presses could be a question of whether the universities accept to develop what Jean Kempf has called in a recent talk a "new ecology of scientific publications".

*Second point:* this shift to editorial models needs to be accompanied if we want it to be successful. It is clear that editorial processes and genres, especially the less formatted ones, demand skills and a professional setting. Clearly, if you need to use Google's "I'm feeling lucky"-Button to find a research blog, it's no use. What sums it up best is the sublime title of Geert Lovink's last book on blogging and user generated content. The director of the Amsterdam based Institute for Network Cultures called it: Zero Comments.



The screenshot may show why initiatives like the French platform for research blogs called *Hypothèses* are so important: *Hypothèses* blogs are hand-picked by a scientific committee, there is a training offer, a relevant set of authors from the humanities and the project is hosted by the non-commercial *Revue.org* structure. This is one way to do it – but we definitely need a lot of experimentation on how to enlarge the harvesting and syndication models that were established by the Open Archives Initiative to “non-standard”, partly non-academic content.

It seems clear to me that the European University Presses have an important role to play here by helping to invent new ways of knowledge production and dissemination. Born out of the spirit of self-organization of the HSS community, sometimes as first-aid solutions, without strong profit orientation, University Presses – ideally – can be experimental labs for the future of publishing. This is of course a question of empowerment vis-à-vis the universities and it is a question of scale and critical mass vis-à-vis the For Profit publishers and their distribution platforms.

With this in mind, let me now address, once again from the viewpoint of an interested amateur, three aspects of the relationship between the university and the university press – or, to be more precise, between the university and *its* university press.

### ***First aspect: Quality management and specialization***

How specialized can a university press be? Sure, there is not one answer here: The press of a big generalist university that has just developed out of the former publication office is in different situation from, for example, the press of my German home university, the Bauhaus Universität Weimar which has over 50 years of experiences in subject focused publishing in Architecture and Design.

But still: does it serve the interests of a scholar if his monograph is published in an area where the press cannot excel (neither in editing and copy reading, nor in marketing)? The alternative to generalist, “first-aid” university presses, is to focus on subject areas where presses can develop strong series in cooperation with their host institutions. Combined with a system of recommendation and forwarding and a joint effort on a higher, preferably European or, why not, global level, specialization doesn’t necessarily have to mean narrowing publication opportunities for researchers.

I am sure Jean Kempf would have said a word on OAPEN here, because OAPEN is, as the majority of you will know, operating on this level. I will leave this task to Saskia de Vries. Let me simply point to the fact that OAPEN is not only an open access infrastructure that uses economics of scale for the publication of digital monographs – it is to be also a quality label and a joint catalogue of the best monographs, selected by each of the partners.

University presses can thus strengthen the image of their host universities by making their best research visible in an international syndication effort – but if they want to stand out, they will probably add to an ongoing process in Academia which is the formation of thematic research hubs, replacing the *Universität* in the sense of Humboldt.

Quality management also means of course to refuse texts, even from the host university. There is a danger here: A frequent response to manuscripts that were not accepted for print was, at least when I was working in a publishing house, to propose that one could at least put the text online. If you allow me to speak from the viewpoint of a “digital native”: this is the worst thing one can do: not only for the reputation of the imprint but above all for the author him or herself. I guess I will have your consent

when I claim that, given the ongoing media change and the research strategies of the digital natives, one should reserve the *best* texts for online publication because they will be the calling card of an author.

What university presses *can* do instead, and this brings me to my second point, is to work with the author on his or her text. Or even better: they can develop long-term training and mentoring relationships with authors, especially from their host university, even *before* the author publishes the first monograph with the press.

### ***Second aspect: training of university staff***

Training and mentoring is a vital point and a much neglected aspect of media change. We discuss media literacy and learning materials in schools, on the *consumer* side – but it seems to me that there is little debate on how to train scientific content *producers*. You might tell me that the *prosumer* paradigm of the web 2.0 makes that distinction obsolete but I think this barely true and rarely more than an excuse. Making scholars fit for high quality, sophisticated scientific writing is a huge task and universities can be happy to have editorial specialists in the press on their campus. This is, by the way, a fundamental difference between not for profit publishers and for profit publishers because profit oriented presses will not and can not assume the role of training their authors and even future authors.

What is at stake here for the University Press is more than an additional task (for which, of course, they need to receive the corresponding means): it is above all a chance to build a considerable symbolic capital that can pay off 15 years later when an author who has been trained, for example, at Lyon University, and with the *Presses universitaires de Lyon*, then gives a major piece to this press or accepts to be a series editor or contributes by other means to the crucial blend of big names and big hopes that make up a publisher's catalogue.

Furthermore, the eternal tension between an elitist and an accessible publishing strategy can be appeased through consistent mentoring of authors. Training them in a variety of editorial genres, introducing them to less formal, more discursive ones, may also help to take pressure from the monograph and the digital monograph form, making it clearly stick out as the acme and not the everyday business of a researcher's CV.

I'd like to add a very short third point that is closely connected to the situation in the Mediterranean area.

***Third aspect: international credibility and translation***

It seems to me that European university presses are not only facing a problem of scale but also a problem of international visibility of the imprint. Shared infrastructures like OAPEN for monographs, or Cairn and Revues.org for journals are important, but they do not respond to the problem of the European multilingualism. According to the famous word by Umberto Eco, "Translation is the language of Europe" – so I was wondering if the European University Presses could make a joint effort in this field too. For example: A regional or European consortium could apply, centrally, for translation funding and allocate it to translation suggestions that come from the partner presses, building up a showcase catalogue. This is what Eurozine, the federation of European cultural journals, is doing with some success for their partner journals.

One would certainly have to adopt the model for monographs. Anyway, there is an urgent need to try publication strategies that correspond to the post national constellation. And this is yet another task for non-commercial publishers, because it is likely that we have to call forth a community which is yet to come.

Because I was invited as a Frenchman, you will allow me to close this introduction with Rimbaud: "Il faut être absolument moderne".

Thank you very much for your attention.