

Ithaka Advocates Online Publishing by Universities

By Nihit Aurora



Scholars studying at American universities have a wide range of avenues available to them for distributing their scholarly work. The Internet has added an extra dimension to their endeavors, extending the concept of academic publishing to include “virtual” publishing.

The nonprofit group Ithaka provides a variety of services that benefit higher education. It recently published a report calling for the use of the Internet and new technology for scholarly publishing by universities in the United States.

Traditionally, universities in the United States have made use of university presses to disseminate their scholarly knowledge. Ithaka’s report, “University Publication in a Digital Age,” reviews the role of universities in the United States and their role in publishing scholarly works. It states:

- Universities should become actively involved in publishing their own scholarship and should desist from letting others publish this information for them.
- Administrators should make greater efforts to recognize the role played by university presses. Furthermore, universities should seek strategic partnerships to lower costs and extend the reach of scholarly publishing.
- University administrators and others should play active roles in rejuvenating the university publishing system by stimulating action and initiating investment.
- Existing university presses should extend their familiarity to the electronic publishing environment. Currently, university presses are facing a variety of financial challenges. Adapting to electronic methods of publishing will help them overcome these challenges.
- Universities should collectively invest in a technological platform that can “support innovation in university-based, mission-driven publishing.”

Ithaka’s report documents that scholars are increasingly turning to online systems to locate and utilize scholarly literature. Moreover, newer publishing models are emerging following the onset of electronic publishing. These models not only reduce costs but also make published material widely available. This means that university presses will need to adapt to more cost-effective and efficient practices like shorter print runs, smaller inventories, and print-on-demand.

If these measures are taken, Ithaka argues, university-published electronic literature will become capable of offering viable alternatives to commercial scholarly publications, which present formidable competition due to their marketing power and intensive capital resources. University presses will also strengthen their traditional role as “knowledge arms” by improving their viability and financial stability.

Ithaka downplays print publishing and argues that digital publishing will give more flexibility to university presses in terms of the role they play. It also stresses the importance of the cooperation of libraries and other institutions in accommodating digital products. The report takes the view that while a significant portion of the academic community has adapted to the online environment, administrators have been slow to follow up on this trend.