Reimagining the University Press
Commissioning Editor
for the 21st Century

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Research Report
The Role of the Editor: Publisher Perspectives (UCL, 2018)
What do commissioning editors do?

10 questions
+ wide range of UK and US participants speaking candidly
+ anonymised answers

= the truth about commissioning in early 21st century

University presses:
Cambridge, Chicago, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Manchester, Oxford, UCL, Yale

Commercial academic:
Ashgate, Bloomsbury Academic
Palgrave Macmillan, Routledge T&F
Death of the expert:
Does the academy value university press publishing and its commissioning editors?

40+ years of expertise, assuring the quality, consistency, survival of the academic record

Digital tech and infrastructure investment e.g. Oxford Scholarship Online

Quality and trust key USPs, gained by editorial field knowledge and rigorous selection process
I had been at a large commercial academic publisher but this university press is a different world, with multiple layers of peer review, quality is its focus – as is a rigorous approach.

Publisher, university press
Crossick confirmed publishers add value:

Publishers add value to the processes of monograph production ... editorial activities, the design of the book and the management of peer review. (2015 monograph report)

However, publishers could try harder to communicate this:

At the start of the 21st century there remains a lack of transparency around publishing practice and processes with ‘the many things that publishers do ... [being] taken for granted.’

Campbell, Pentz, and Borthwick, 2012

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We’ve been too passive- we can do a better job as publishers to clarify the value we add.

Publishing Director, commercial academic press

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Or have their position challenged
What’s the role of commissioning editors?

Creative curators with a uniquely broad-ranging knowledge of their subject areas. Have a clear understanding of what makes an academic book critically and financially successful. Central to the relationship between author and reader.

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Added value

*Editor who have the right combination of intellectual creativity, social flair and financial nous are highly-valued assets.*

John Thomson, 2005

*Editors tend to form the engine room of a publishing house – they select the books we publish, and ensure the quality threshold is met consistently.*

Publishing Director, university press

*There is a real skill here that involves a blending together of intellectual creativity and marketing nous, and that distinguishes outstanding editors.*

John Thompson, 2012
Editors’ early input centres on either pro-actively coming up with an idea for a new book and then finding the best author to write it or working with an author to develop an idea around their expertise and research which would be able to find a market.

The added value of commissioning editors – responses from editors

Someone outside the academy, but who nonetheless sees many manuscripts and is invested in a field, is valuable ...

... a good editor will use this knowledge and experience to improve a book, working closely with an author to bring out the best material possible.

My main successes working with authors are from guidance on the overall concept and ideas, and an understanding as to whether or not it was better than the competition.
Is creativity being squeezed from the role because of financial pressures?

There has been a shift in the last ten years away from editors guiding an author’s work...towards a narrower interpretation of the role that focuses on the initial processes of decision-making and the final analysis of the success or otherwise of the publication.

(Guthrie, 2011)

The editor’s level of interaction is more around list curation at topic level, not on individual author’s writing. This limitation has increased as there are so many titles to publish.

Commercial academic publisher

I wouldn’t want hands-on editors as it would haemorrhage cash. It’s too time-consuming, costly, and you can’t achieve the volume of titles required.

Commercial academic publisher
... while other editors trade on their hands-on creative production approach to the role

We are very distinctive – we think of ourselves as a trade list – we develop books to translate research for a broader market. Open access doesn’t work for us because of the editorial interventions we make.

University press publisher

I work really closely with academics to get their books in shape. I can do that because I am responsible for relatively few titles, whereas editors at university presses have bigger lists. I only ever read a manuscript from the point of view of a general reader i.e. is this comprehensible, sequential and clearly written.

Simon Winder, Penguin Press

Where’s the added value for authors and readers?
What about job satisfaction?

Publishers need human capital ...

The success of the firm depends crucially on the ability to acquire, train and retain highly motivated editors who are able to come up with a strong list of new projects and develop them into commercially successful books, and who are able to form long-standing relationships of trust with creative and productive authors.

(Thompson, 2005)
What about new technology?  
Cultural shifts?

Has this bypassed the commissioning editor role?

The remarkable thing about commissioning is that the role has changed much less than every other role around it over the past decade.

University press publisher
University Press respondents reported less change than those at commercial academic publishers

I don’t think the editor’s role has changed, at least not dramatically. Gate-keeping, aligning the goals of the publishing house with the editor’s particular list, perhaps inventing more projects than winnowing proposals on offer. These are small adjustments to the role played for a half century or more – determining what is urgently of interest, finding it and making it happen.

The core role of the editor has essentially changed very little in the past 5 years, and is unlikely to change to any significant extent in the next 5 years.

in general the editor role is similar to ten years ago, but a bit more proactive.
Where’s the opportunity?

Expert and experienced editors are the ace up the sleeves of publishers in the face of the huge challenge of self-publishing and the Internet.

Michael Bhaskar, 2016

Ideas are the most important added value of editors, together with field knowledge. Having better ideas than your competitors is what drives successful academic publishing.

Commercial academic publisher
Digital training agendas have not tended to include commissioning editors.

The gap

I am increasingly having conversations with authors wanting more interactive elements in ebooks... This is really problematic – we’re not set up to do this and lack experience.

I, and others I speak to, currently feel a bit at sea.
As a member of the ‘books’ generation, I find it daunting.

It has been very difficult to get a digital culture going in the company.

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The result

We have experimented [digitally] with the form of the book e.g. disaggregation and presentation in shorter, cheaper versions, but it’s been one disappointment after another.

We have been experimental around the edges – but this is expensive and has almost a 100% failure rate.
Commissioning editors + digital: a missed opportunity?

**New product development**

Editors understand how to work with ideas and words, to conceptualise publications, to reach readers.

They understand their authors and readers better than anyone else in their companies.

Editors need access within their roles to digital tools and platforms, research on reading— and time to play with new ideas.

Editors can work with authors to drive digital innovation in NPD and online social content.

Editors are motivated by job satisfaction.
Innovating to reach a wider audience

Relevant and immediately engaging concept

Lively intellectual approach, accessible language and structure

Attractive presentation, packaging and price e.g. OUP VSI

Print + digital – single bundle?

Alternative formats – short monographs (Macmillan Pivots, Sage Swifts, Yale E-Shorts)

Social platforms: author and reader community

Requires: editor creativity and imagination + subject knowledge and relationships – and publishing experience

VSI series (OUP, 1995–) critical and commercial success
Accessible academic writing
5million + print copies sold
New university presses:
Innovation, OA + digital-first

UCL Press

Goldsmiths Press
If you keep making distinctions between ‘digital roles’ and ‘traditional’ roles, you’re not pushing your traditional roles to adapt.

Marissa Hussey, digital development director, Orion

We get masses of traffic worldwide for our user-friendly blog platform.

On the books side it is the editors pitching specific authors as they know the content best. University press publisher