

## AAUP TALK

### Steve Yates on The Voice of Mississippi Scholars

Sometimes some good can come from significant rage, or at least from the proper channeling of it. During the University of Missouri Press closure crisis, I found myself enraged, and I really must salute my colleagues at Mississippi for enduring me and my sometimes very public loud mouth over those long months.

Why would I be enraged? Missouri is my native state, my shelf is laden with books from UMP, and I had an acute awareness of what a closure crisis involves, having endured and survived the closure crisis at University of Arkansas Press in 1998. I knew a measure of what my friends at Missouri were suffering, and it brought back a lot of terrible memories.

Regardless of how often we tell ourselves that we matter, that scholarly publishing is noble and necessary, that our presence raises the cache of a degree or the profile of a university or the universal level of karmic good by making sure that scholarly communication thrives and goes on, there is a palpable disconnect between what we are doing and two critical constituencies we exist to serve. Because we are often only convincing ourselves, evangelizing the choir, we miss that it is the faculty on our campuses and the administrators who make support decisions who need regular and tangible evidence beyond the printed book to perceive why a university press is worth fighting for.

If we are not diligent and a little loud at Mississippi, that disconnect can become even more acute. We are a consortium press, supported by the eight public universities of Mississippi. Each year our crucial subsidy, a support divided among Alcorn State, Delta State, Jackson State, Mississippi Valley State, Mississippi University for Women, Mississippi State, University of Mississippi, and University of Southern Mississippi, amounts to just 11% of our annual operating budget. That's a very good thing. And so is the sustainable economic truth that even the largest contributor among those eight can robustly participate in scholarly publishing for about the salary of one faculty member, one full professor. We are not located in Oxford: Surprise! And we are not housed on any campus. Our very supportive board includes two members from each of the campuses. They travel to meet twice a year face to face and twice a year now by phone conference. And, other than one year during the recent great recession, we have made or exceeded budgeted sales every year since 1998 and many before that.

This makes us an entity largely under the radar since we are a bargain that presents no crises and generates 89-90% of the money it uses. A center with a very low impact.

And therein arises both a wonder and a problem.

My own inflamed perceptions of what was occurring at Missouri magnified this danger, this disconnect. So much so that one frothing morning in our director's office, I wildly, furiously proposed we spend almost \$30,000 of endowment money on a campaign to show our faculty and administrators on our eight campuses the face of what we do, some of the humanity of what we do, and some of the facts of our worth, our value.

This became **The Voice of Mississippi Scholars**, <http://www.upress.state.ms.us/thevoiceofms>, largely a print advertising campaign using two slick consumer magazines and one statewide business journal and also a direct mail campaign to place before the public, the faculty, and the administrators a human face to scholarly communication.

I'm handing around examples to share rather than making you look up at slides on a screen. Minus the crop marks and printer's scale, these are what the adverts can look like if presented as a full magazine page or run as a flyer. The adverts are scalable and so do not always receive such a big treatment. And they pop better in magazines, meaning that our color copier at the press is only so good at color separation.

A visibility or awareness campaign frees you up to do some things we hardly ever do well and hardly ever try as scholarly publishers. We puff and talk about branding, but come on, we're not Mercedes; we're not even Chrysler. As a percentage of sales we sometimes don't even have as an annual marketing spend what a new local restaurant will burn through promoting in its first year. We advertise book covers mostly in hard to find, rare magazines and sequestered journals, and we present those covers in the most creaky old Sears catalog way imaginable. We hardly ever get to put a person in an advert. And that's all people want to look at anyway, other people! Ray Potter of Princeton taught us all of this in AAUPs of yore.

So an awareness campaign, especially one that means to connect with faculty and administrators, changes all that. You're not marketing one book and then another. You're marketing a scholarly creator and his or her passion, his or her contribution, and, with a hammer if you can, the ways your company unlocked, unleashed, became the bandwidth for that passion.

To my delight, the eight scholars of recent books were not only an easy choice, but some of them, George Dor, Yumi Park, Aaron Anderson, and Don Jackson, had or arranged to have active and dramatic photographs of themselves taken. Aaron Anderson's university publicity department hired a photographer and set him up in a special auditorium to teach for the photo shoot. And there out of many good pictures, they got us this one, where the subject matter he is teaching seems to permeate him and even to emanate from within. Yumi Park's photograph—it's hard to beat standing in front of a mountain range in the Andes for a dramatic take on work in the field. George Kwasi Worlasi Dor's photograph has a little story behind it. Ever the conscientious scholar, he worried at my choice, the one here. He preferred a very sedate, poorly lit picture of him standing (and not touching) a large African drum. The photograph I was pushing he felt privileged Ghana and West Africa and would be seen in a negative light by colleagues because of its nationalistic tendencies—you can imagine the scholarly concerns, right? This even though I assured him that readers of the *Mississippi Business Journal*, while knowledge bearers with much acumen, would not quite see the nuances he feared. I managed to get him to agree to rest a night on the matter. And thankfully at breakfast, he showed his little daughter the two choices, and she said, "Daddy, you must be kidding."

As to what the scholars say in each of the blocks, you're never gonna believe this, but I wrote it out for them and, other than a tweak or two, they rolled with it. Except one. Right about the time I was

conceiving the project, Don Jackson at Mississippi State, emailed us and shared his story about the young Marine, a story which I still have trouble reading aloud. Everybody on staff printed it out and pinned it up. No question there what to do. And his was the first one we finished. Don has taught practically every member of the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks, and he's teaching a student how to radio tag a catfish in the picture.

The PMS colors of the adverts are actually one of the two or three official PMS colors for the eight universities. All of the scholars loved working on this. We sent them their own copies to frame, and had our board members present each university president with a framed copy. Our board, though quiet for about six or seven terrifying seconds longer than I anticipated after I presented the project and its scope and the eight designs ... they love it as well.

I don't have concrete advice for you about how you might start a campaign that raises the awareness of your university press on campus and connects you with your faculty. As I have said many times: All happy and successful presses are different; it is the unhappy, failing presses that are exactly the same. Your strengths and circumstances can guide you. And your authors, your scholars.

But generally in undertaking any campaign to reconnect I will say this:

Forget about selling product. We are about people, passionate people who do something really rare and incredible. If you want to connect, if you want to show your value tangibly, if you want to put a human face on scholarly communication, start by showing your authors passionately doing what they do. And then remind everyone you possibly can the many ways in which you, a university press, can uniquely serve.