Subsidized Periodical Publishing

LEE ASH

Subsidized periodical publications fall into several categories. Not easily discoverable as a class, they cover all fields of learning and include, for example, a large number of the titles issuing from the university presses, the publications of membership organizations (the ALA Bulletin), those of special professional interest sponsored by schools or departments of universities or other institutions (Library Trends), those sponsored by private commercial firms (Wilson Library Bulletin), and many of the "little" magazines. This brief paper deals almost exclusively with the first two categories—university press and membership organization publications.

Subsidies are even more heterogeneous and difficult to define, for they do not, usually, originate in direct grants but are obscured from investigation by the complex accounting systems of overall grants by foundations, some of which may help to support the programs of parent organizations or university presses. Others come from personal charities or are sponsored by society or institutional budgets. Still others are completely hidden, taking the form of editorial services, voluntary charitable mailing, and unpaid authorship.

As an aftermath of the controversy over the support of fellowships at Oxford in the last quarter of the 19th century, one of the questions that have grown in the mind of the general public and legislative bodies has concerned the doubtful values of the apparently disproportionate ratio of expenditures for research to expenditures for "practical" returns. Since World War II we have seen tremendous public support for projects in all the sciences. These projects have been rationalized, largely, as some part of the "national defense effort," and the intensity of doubt about their practicality has thus been relieved. But in spite of this new attitude of public generosity, the question

The author, formerly Editor of the Library Journal, is Editor and Research Analyst, Selective Book Retirement Program, Yale University Library.
about "values" has hardly abated with regard to the humanities and the social sciences, and it is in these areas of scholarship that subsidy has become essential yet uncertain.

Unfortunately, there do not seem to be any revelatory breakdowns of the appropriation of foundation monies for the support of publication. F. E. Andrews' extensive "Introduction" to the invaluable modern handbook of foundation practices, The Foundation Directory, makes scant mention of publication, and only the briefest references to publication as an end result are found in individual descriptions of the "Purposes and Activities" of the more than 5000 foundations listed in the book. It would probably be impossible to count the number of periodicals which are supported, wholly or in part, by subsidy from foundations or by private grants from universities or individuals. The number is, however, obviously tremendous.

Nevertheless, the problems of periodical publishers are many, and in very few cases—except under total subsidy—are the funds allotted to the support of publication considered adequate to cover the recognized needs of the fields they represent or sufficient to assure publication of all worthy scholarly contributions. Even so, as has been pointed out by Rush Welter in his invaluable study, Problems of Scholarly Publication in the Humanities, "the problems affecting publication in learned journals are less acute than the problems of scholarly book publication in the United States. . . . Many journals are published for only a few actual subscribers besides the university libraries that habitually buy publications in almost every field of scholarship, and although they perform a number of valuable scholarly functions, they may often be more important as outlets for work in progress than as repositories of completed scholarship." 4

Herein, of course, lies one probable motivation of a principal purpose for much subsidization of research by foundations in this country: the "seminal theory" whereby provocative research is supported in a bread-upon-the-waters plan in order to stimulate development of a field, a program, a project, or even an idea. The success or end-product of the research need not be guaranteed to the sponsor, and publication is not always considered the necessary end to be gained. Paradoxically, since grants do not usually guarantee publication of studies, they do—unfortunately—contribute to the mass of new material submitted for publication for reasons of utility, pride, self-advancement, or competitiveness, all factors in the make up of scholarship.

In his remarks on "Non-Book Activities," a part of his landmark
LEE ASH

studies of the American university press, Chester Kerr reveals a little of the history and much on the character of a large segment of subsidized periodicals in the United States—those published by the university presses. Kerr describes the administration and supervision of editorial matters (the selection of material for publication, the techniques of editorial handling, printing, and distribution), and demonstrates a variety of support, as it was in 1949, when he answers his question, “How were these 96 publications financed?” as follows:

Thirty-three were financed from press budgets. Twenty-seven were financed from separate university funds, often departmental budgets. In 11 cases, both press and university funds were used. Nine were financed by learned societies. Another 9 were supported by press and outside funds combined. Funds for three were furnished by the parent institution jointly with an outside organization and in another 4 cases, the press, the university, and an outside organization combined resources to foot the bill.

Operating expense and income figures were supplied for 82 periodicals. . . . The income figures do not include subsidies and in only 9 cases were publications able to break even during the Survey Year [1948] without subsidies. Subsidies totalling $129,000 were provided for these periodicals during this period from press, university, and outside sources. Even these subventions, it will be noticed, were not enough to bridge the gap between the costs of these publications and their operating revenue. 

In his 1955 Supplement Kerr does not comment extensively upon subsidy support of periodicals, but he does mention subsidies in connection with the total university press budget, and he classifies their sources (comparing them with 1948 percentages) as follows: parent institutions, authors, foundations, other outside organizations, other educational institutions, nonacademic, and “other.” Even though these 1955 figures are for the total university press budget, the picture with regard to periodicals seems to be about the same, and it is obvious that parent institutions and foundations recognize their increasing responsibilities to maintain the scholarship represented in university press publications. Indeed, as Kerr reflects on the increased contributions toward subsidy, he remarks hopefully, “If the foregoing figures are in fact meaningful, they offer some hope that foundations, which have too long insisted on financing scholarly research without providing funds in support of publication, may be taking a more realistic view of this matter.”

[304]
Subsidized Periodical Publishing

There is need for an extensive study of available sources, and a systematic program of uniform accounting of subsidy funds (such as has been pointed out by the American Association of University Presses at various times), the directors of several university presses have said, in order to approach the wholly confused situation more satisfactorily. A typical situation, for example, is demonstrated in correspondence received in the course of preparing this paper. A university press director reports:

The 'indirect expenses' listed consist of salaries paid to press personnel, an attempt at as accurate cost accounting as we could achieve. These vary greatly [from periodical to periodical]. We backtrack editors and copy edit only three of the journals. . . . Costs of mailing current subscriptions [to two journals] come under manufacturing; all others (done in our mailing room) come under indirect expenses. [Two journals] have part-time secretaries paid for by Press funds; the others must resort to catch-as-catch-can. The perhaps puzzling 'university subsidy' figure indicated under income is merely our way of presenting the required balanced budget: it is our guess of the year before as to how much a certain periodical's expenses would exceed its income. The source is our over-all university subsidy. . . . I am happy to say that the over-all picture (i.e. the percentage of our university subsidy absorbed by periodicals) is considered better than it was . . . in 1945.

Although, as has been pointed out earlier, the growth rate of subsidy support for periodical publication of the scholar's product has had its greatest impetus since World War II, even in 1928 Ogg's dramatic survey of the situation showed the beginnings of some hopeful trends which are maturing in the second half of the century. These trends must continue, as Kerr implies, if this kind of periodical publishing is to survive in the face of the most important factors influencing rising costs: production and administrative operations.

The entire picture is best presented by Welter where his spirited analysis expertly points up the situation "not to exaggerate the obstacles that periodicals face but to place their current problems in context." In paraphrase, first of all, most scholarly journals cannot make ends meet financially by any dependence upon society membership or subscription, not even with the measure of advertising that comes to them from publishers, equipment manufacturers, and others. In most cases, with or without direct subsidy, the budget of a scholarly periodical is limited by certain uncomfortable internal administrative
economies. For example, authors are almost never paid for contributions, editorial staff operations are seldom salaried ("most editors of scholarly journals receive honoraria or partial relief from teaching duties or both, they perform most of their labors on time that other scholars can consider 'free' and for sums that are hardly commensurate with their obligations"), and many overhead journalistic costs are absorbed by some parent institution related to the editor or the journal—costs such as secretarial assistance, office equipment and supplies, and rent—volunteering, in effect, indirect subsidy.

What about editorial supervision and subsidy? While there is no discernible pattern in the attitudes of subsidizing agencies toward the use of their funds for publication, no attempt is usually made to influence the content of the published work, even when grants are specifically made for publication. Mostly, grants for publication are subsidies offered to help the entire research activity. It is unusual for a donor to exercise any kind of supervision, especially over nonbook materials such as are published in learned journals, since normal editorial functions are generally recognized as being sufficiently selective.

But other special problems arise in connection with the publishing of scholarly journals. Some relate to financing, and it should be pointed out here that, as Welter has proposed, special funds need to be made available to meet extraordinary problems faced by both scholars and editors, such as the frightening extra costs of such items as illustration, special type composition, space for longer articles, etc. Welter suggests that monies need to be made available "to journals that present a realistic budget reflecting a multiplicity of special needs and purposes . . . to offer energetic editors an unusual opportunity to devise their own programs of editorial improvement while still making possible awards in aid of more nearby pedestrian activities that also require support of some sort."  

Bad luck has pursued the issue though, and in July 1961, Speculum, published by the Mediaeval Academy of America, printed a report from its delegate to the American Council of Learned Societies, B. J. Whiting, who attended the January meeting of the Council's members and wrote, in part:

To us the most pressing need is for direct aid for scholarly publication. After its study of two years ago [by Welter] the Council sought to obtain $1,000,000 to be used over a five-year period in support of monographic publications and learned journals of the kind which the
survey showed to have the most difficulty in appearing in print. The response has been unfavorable and Mr. Burkhardt [President of the A.C.L.S.] was forced to say 'that at the present time [January 1961] I cannot provide any grounds for optimism regarding the prospects of this proposal.' During the business meeting it was pointed out that the Ford Foundation is already engaged in a form of subsidy of university presses, but as one delegate remarked, this is of little help to societies, such as ours [i.e., the Mediaeval Academy of America], which publish their own books. There is, no doubt, logic of some grim kind behind the Foundation’s long continuing reluctance to underwrite publication, but it eludes the mind of a simple mediaevalist.

The seemingly curious irony of the case, so stated, is emphasized by the fact that at the same meeting of the A.C.L.S. a grant of $5,670,000 from the Ford Foundation was announced, to be applied over a ten-year period for administrative costs, conferences and committees, post-doctoral fellowships in the humanities, grants-in-aid for individual research, for the president’s discretionary fund, and for assistance to American scholars in their travel to foreign conferences. All of these activities can lead only to a mass of new materials awaiting publication.

A further contradiction may be noted in the case of one major foundation which, although it is opposed in general to the granting of funds for publication, has been known to provide funds for typewriter composition of research papers, knowing, of course, that this enables offset publication—but with other monies.

One other strange or unexpected problem with regard to subsidization exists. There is, oddly enough, an element of scholarship which disputes the value of periodical publication at the cost of extended field or laboratory work. This remarkable attitude is represented in the columns “Our Readers Write” in Current Anthropology, a journal sponsored since 1957 by funds contributed by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. In the April 1961 issue a correspondent wrote as follows:

I feel a strong kinship with the anonymous Englishman who deplored the draining away of Wenner-Gren funds to support a periodical. Aside from the question of a professional’s voice or ‘rights’ vis-a-vis those of a contributing foundation, it is my belief that money for research and the training of professionals is more sorely needed now than it may be at some time in the future.

Would it not be wise, after 18 months or 2 years of operation for
LEE ASH

CA to present a rough cost accounting to all Associates? The individual Associate could then match the lost research potential from Wenner-Gren funds against what he has received through his participation in CA. Perhaps a pro and con discussion in CA would be in order. The question is worth much thought from all of us who are concerned with the needs of anthropology, and with what we think it should do and become.

But another correspondent, replying in the same issue to this argument which apparently supports a plea for further work in the field, takes issue with the original complaint and makes some telling points when he says that the writer

... seems to express a frenzied devotion to 'research on disappearing cultures' to the exclusion of all other anthropological activity. ... The library shelves are lined with descriptive accounts; why not do something with what we have? ... Nor should all Foundation funds be channelled in a single direction. CA is one of the most significant developments in anthropology precisely because it makes generalization possible among scholars from different traditions, working on different problems and in different regions. Its brief achievements bode well for the realization of its splendid potentialities.

And so, once again, the argument for publication of scholarly researches seems to have prevailed, this time after a different kind of attack.

What then, in summary, seems to be the attitude of the major subsidizers, the foundations, that unique group of patronal organizations of men whose boards of directors make disbursements to the extent of nearly $700,000,000 annually for all purposes? Talks with administrative personnel in various foundations indicate that the foundations do not directly interest themselves, except occasionally, in publication. Rather generally, they are concerned with the promotion of research activities and the support of professional bodies that may or may not produce journals or written reports as part of a research program. The foundations seem to understand that publication is one of the ends of scholarship and that the structure of academic and organizational functions depends upon their response to sound proposals made to them by groups or individuals whose ideas they can respect in terms of the purposes for which the foundations are established. They do not, as a rule, concern themselves with administrative or organizational details of projects they support.

Welter and H. M. Jones, the latter in his *One Great Society*, have
Subsidized Periodical Publishing

stated the intentions and goals of "human learning in the United States." Jones' "Epilogue" finds money one of the great bugbears of the development of scholarship, and on the matter of publication he says, "The problem haunting humanistic scholarship is the problem of publication. The costs of manufacturing and publishing books in this country during the past half century, have increased by about 600% if sober estimates are to be believed . . . the financial support of many scholarly journals is precarious."

As Welter concludes, in the final sentence of his report, whether dealing with books or periodicals, "In the last analysis the health of scholarly publishing will depend upon the devoted services of the community of scholars and upon the generosity of one or more of the philanthropic foundations." 14

References

4. Ibid., p. 49.
7. Ibid., pp. 36-42.
8. Ibid., p. 42.
10. Welter, op. cit., pp. 50-64.