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Pressing for Revolution

In a room at the UC Santa Barbara Library, Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy and her students prepare for revolution. They wield no weapons, only words. They seek not to overthrow a government, but to disrupt the multibillion-dollar academic publishing industry.

Joy leads the Arnhold Punctum Publishing Lab, an internship that teaches nine undergraduates and two graduate students the business and art of publishing — from raw manuscript to distribution — over two quarters. More broadly, Joy advocates for “open access” publishing, the practice of making peer-reviewed scholarly research and literature freely available online to anyone interested in reading it.

Open access is a radical concept in the U.S., where academic publishing is a highly profitable industry — and one that’s increasingly straining the budgets of university libraries. It’s a phenomenon Joy knows well. As director of punctum books, an open-access imprint she founded on April Fool’s Day in 2011, she’s been immersed in the movement to make academic publishing more accessible, affordable and interesting.

“We have the skills, the means and the people to take back the reins of publishing into the hands of the university,” Joy said. “In some ways it’s like an activist movement; we want to get the knowledge generated by public university researchers back into the public domain.”

For Joy, who was an associate professor of English at Southern Illinois University until leaving in 2013 to work full-time as punctum's director in the U.S. (a co-director is based in the Netherlands), introducing open access-publishing to students made perfect sense. The future of the "content industry" — books, newspapers, magazines, music — is digital, she explained.

"How can we give them the tools to enter into this new world of digital publishing, and how can they have their own impact within it?" Joy said. "And how can they help us solve the current problems that we're facing?"

The publishing lab, funded for three years by an Arnhold Collaborative Research Grant, provides students a stipend as they develop three books for Brainstorm Books, a punctum imprint for the English department's Literature and the Mind specialization, which studies the intersections of neuroscience, cognitive studies, philosophy of the mind, psychoanalysis, literature and the arts.

Each team of three undergraduates and one grad student develops a book. The first quarter focuses on content: copyediting, proofing and research verification. In the second term teams design their book and the digital version (a PDF). The teams meet for three hours five times a term.

The students are a diverse bunch. In the lab's first year they came from English, dance, education, philosophy, art history and biology. "What they all had in common was an interest in psychology, neuroscience and the arts," Joy said. "So they got to work on books that were speaking to subjects that meant something to them. The way I looked at it was, they're getting practical experience, experiential knowledge, and this is still academic and intellectual."

The lab, though, is about more than teaching students how to publish books. It's part of Joy's commitment to bringing the open-access movement to universities. "What I really want is to stop the privatization of public knowledge," she said.

Joy explained that academic publishing today is dominated by large, corporate publishers who enjoy profit margins of roughly 30 percent. Their revenues come from two chief sources: books and specialty academic journals. In the former, manuscripts are turned into books, which the publisher sells back to universities at prices significantly higher than those found in the popular press.

For example, she noted, a Stephen King hardback might cost between $15 and $30. “But if I write an obscure book on Italian Renaissance painting, which is probably going to be read by 110 people,” Joy added, the publisher will likely sell it for $100 or more. “I was in a book recently that was listed on Amazon for $249. They want to capture all of this knowledge and privatize it.”

Journals, she said, command even higher prices in a model that she likened to the way cable TV bills its customers. University libraries can’t buy a handful of journals; the publishers demand that they purchase a package that includes many they don’t want.

“What these companies charge libraries for journal subscriptions is mind-boggling,” Joy said. “Tens of thousands of dollars per journal in some cases. In other cases they do what I call the cable TV-style bundling, where you get 300 channels you don’t even want. But to get the five channels you do want, you have to get the whole package. So library budgets have literally become crippled. This is no exaggeration.”

Joy believes the open-access movement can ride to the rescue by closing or narrowing the pipeline between the corporate publishers and universities. She concedes there are significant hurdles, particularly funding. The University of California system has an open-access policy, but it’s hobbled by a lack of funding and the contractual inability of authors to release their works outside their publisher’s imprint.

Punctum generates revenue, if at modest levels. Its books, which are peer-reviewed, are priced between $15 and $21. PDFs are available for $5 for the first six months, after which they’re free. The entire punctum catalog is available online. The imprint is also supported by donations and subscriptions.

“We started the press on the premise that there needed to be a place for work that was academic but not conventional,” said Joy, a medievalist whose dissertation was “Beowulf and the Floating Wreck of History.” “We’re also looking for the weird, odd fellow. We’re encouraging people to take risks, experiment with styles of writing, structure, what is it about, that kind of thing. But it still has to be super-smart and well-written.”

“We believe in ‘broadcast’ funding of innovation, not the kind of intense, gate-keeping funding in fashion today. There’s a place for the latter, but you simply can’t always tell where the new ideas that really take off are going to come from,” said

Aranye Fradenburg Joy, a UCSB professor of English, founder of the Literature and Mind specialization, and a co-director of Brainstorm Books. She added that while the punctum imprint provides an eclectic range of works, its open-access platform offers something even bigger: food for the soul.

“We’re committed to open access because of our belief that minds everywhere need and deserve wonder and provocation and a chance to participate in the creation of new forms of knowledge and expressivity,” she said. “We see open-access publication as integral to our commitment to the mind’s endless hunger for communication.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.