"Immodest Proposals"

Remarks prepared for the Committee on Institutional Cooperation
Chicago, December 2, 2003

Pauline Yu
President, American Council of Learned Societies

Introduction

I am delighted at the opportunity to meet with you today, having not had the pleasure of the company of so many deans, provosts, and other academic leaders since leaving UCLA for ACLS this summer. If the CIC is the Big Ten + 2, our equivalent meeting was the Pac 10 + 2, those 2—strategically selected—being Alaska and Hawaii. Our next meeting was scheduled for Honolulu. I was sorry that my departure from UCLA meant giving that up, but I'm sure you'll all agree that Chicago in December beats Honolulu any day.

I am also especially pleased to be sharing this platform with John Unsworth. I first met John when we served together on a taskforce convened by the Council for Library and Information Resources to consider how the scholarly and library communities should approach preservation of the diversifying range of materials they are responsible for: printed books and documents, film, audio materials and digital productions. John was the principal author of the digital section of the report. His appointment as dean of the library school at Urbana-Champaign is one more vivid indication of how the library has become an important arena for working out many of the changes we have been discussing this morning.

My cooperation with, and ACLS' reliance on, John will continue, as he has generously agreed to chair a commission we're convening to produce a report on the Humanities and Advanced Cyberinfrastructure. What is that, you ask? "Advanced Cyberinfrastructure" is more than just hardware and software, more than bigger computer boxes and wider pipes and wires connecting them. The term was coined by NSF to describe the new research environments in which capabilities of the highest level of computing tools are available to researchers in an interoperable network. These environments will be built, and ACLS feels it is important for the humanities and social sciences to participate in their design and construction.

But Cyberinfrastructure, while critically related to scholarly communication, is not that subject itself. Were we to achieve even the grandest dreams of a cyberinfrastructure, we would still need to address many of the issues put forth already this morning. The term is useful, however, in that it draws our attention to systems and their interrelation, and, as many have already pointed out, we must think of scholarly communication as a system, which of course is embedded in a larger set of issues involving disciplinary transformations, shifts in undergraduate enrollments, and

the size of the graduate student population. So in what time remains let me move on to my three proposals. I will leave it to you to assess the degree of their immodesty.

Proposal number 1: Stay calm. While the language of "crisis" helps focus attention, I don't think it improves analysis. Perhaps we should take our cue from the emergency evacuation instructions a colleague found on the back of hotel room door in Canada. The instructions in English began "1. Stay Calm." I like the French version: "Gardez votre sang froid." We do need a bit of sang froid, we need to be cold blooded as we approach this problem.

Why should we stay calm? Three reasons. First, whatever you think about the actual extent of the crisis, this meeting gives reason for hope. We have gathered here all the critical elements of the infrastructure of scholarly communication: university leadership, learned societies, research libraries, philanthropic foundations, and university presses. I thank the CIC for making this happen, and I hope similar meetings of the relevant parties will be taking place on your campuses as well.

Second, while not necessarily questioning the depth of the crisis, I'll note that its breadth is less than the total scope of the humanities and social sciences. There are obviously many fields or subfields in those domains where the monograph is not and has never been the primary vehicle for scholarly communication or the only valid currency for promotion and tenure.

Third—and here I will be somewhat cold-blooded—maybe more books, more print books, are not a desirable solution. The figures tell us that their numbers have increased dramatically, even as the difficulties of getting published have become more lamented and our per capita purchases have decreased. (Having just finished unpacking 150 boxes of them, I know that I'm not part of the problem.) What do we know of those monographs that are going unpublished? For those whose readership may be inherently limited—whatever the reasons—is the monographic form their inevitable expression? As the old European empires were broken up at Versailles after World War I, Churchill moaned in exasperation, "Must every language have a country?" Must every research project of any scope culminate in a print book? I ask this being mindful that many structures of academic life, including our own ACLS fellowship competitions, reinforce the monograph as the leading currency of scholarship. These questions remind us that the "crisis of the monograph" is as much a conceptual crisis as it is an economic one.

Proposal number 2: Embrace complexity. Scholarly communication is a system whose features have become so naturalized that we forget their historical constructedness and contingency. As Cathy Davidson and others have pointed out, there's no single villain—not even Reed Elsevier—we can fairly blame for all of our woes. We have come to the present pass thanks to a complex convergence of forces and as the cumulative result of practices and policies adopted or countenanced by many of us, or our predecessors in this room. Resolutions will have to be equally complex and will require, I think, a mix of strategies.

In 1958, the ACLS sponsored a study to determine whether or not scholarly manuscripts faced difficulties extrinsic to their merit in attaining publication. The

study concluded that "in most branches of the humanities and social sciences at the present time, the uncomplicated scholarly manuscript of good quality can usually count upon reasonably rapid publication at no expense to the author." How were our predecessors able to solve the problem that seemingly stymies us? One word: "subsidy." The ACLS study traced the happy state of affairs in scholarly publishing to a major Ford Foundation program supporting university presses.

If subsidies are an answer to today's difficulties, they must engage several possible objections. Economists will point out that subsidizing supply is almost always inefficient; a better course would be to subsidize demand, in this case by increasing support for university libraries. Moreover, we command but imprecise knowledge of the economics of scholarly publishing. That is, if we do want to establish countervailing forces in the scholarly publishing market, can we estimate accurately the minimum ("most efficient") amount of scarce resources we would need to apply to achieve the desired effect? Let us pass over questions of where this uncertain amount of money is to come from and recall that the subsidy model of scholarly publishing lost favor for substantive as well as budgetary reasons. We all know that since the 1970s, universities have been trying to wean their presses from subsidies, but the reasons were not solely fiscal ones. One aim, I am told, was to give the presses the responsibility, and the autonomy, to develop professional publishing programs focused on scholarly merit, rather than institutional obligations or sheer marketability.

There's no question that university presses do add editorial, production and marketing value to their publications, with real costs that must be recovered. Almost all presses today are lean and effective operations that can accommodate only with difficulty manuscripts with the prospect of a limited readership. If we believe in the project of the autonomous university press, then perhaps we need to rethink how to distribute, in forms other than monographs, the knowledge contained in those manuscripts, rather than overturn a project that has a genuine logic to it. That logic is egalitarian and meritocratic. It allows an unsubsidized author with a promising manuscript to publish with a prestigious press. A system of providing authors with subventions would establish an implicit partnership between presses and the dispensers of subsidies and is likely to map onto existing patterns of university wealth or disciplinary market appeal. Is that what we want? If we go that route, how can we protect the centrality of merit in the decision about whether or not to publish? Could a subvention program be administered competitively by learned societies, as Carlos Alonso has suggested? Could publication subsidies be linked to national fellowship competitions? (I hasten to add that the importance of providing research start-up packages to all humanities faculty goes without saying; the question for me is whether or not they should be specifically earmarked as publication subsidies.)

The other great force telescoping onto the crisis of scholarly publication is of course the evolution of university tenure practices. You're probably familiar with the long list of reasons why God has never been granted tenure, which include the following: There was only one major publication. It was in a foreign language. It had no references. It wasn't published in a refereed journal. And where's the second book? At some point in the past, like most of us, God might have won tenure with one book, and probably less.

No one suggests that we, either at ACLS or those on university promotion and tenure committees, should lower our scholarly expectations, but let's think again on our instruments and processes for measuring scholarly achievement. Here's one proposal I've received: Everyone gets a set of chits, one of which allows you to produce a book every ten years, others that permit publishing an article every two years. Black market trades will allow desperate overproducers to exceed these limits, but the articles they produce with someone else's chits will be credited to the original owner in the academic review process, thus satisfying the compulsion but discounting the value of sheer quantity of production. Aren't there, in fact, many fine arguments now stretched to fill two covers that could just as well—or perhaps even more effectively—be presented in an article or two and be read by many more people to boot? One hopes that the forthcoming report of the American Historical Association on this issue will receive great attention. Entries on *curricula vitae* should "be weighed, not counted."

Ensuring the robustness of scholarly journals as we seek alternatives to monograph publishing will continue to be crucial. Research universities like yours already play an important part by providing homes and resources for them. Indiana University's very deliberate policy of housing scholarly journals deserves special mention here. Such support is a direct and important contribution to the overall health of the system of scholarly communication, one that is as least as valuable as possible subsidies for the publication of monographs. It is, moreover, but a tiny fraction of the institutional funding for research that is traditionally provided to the sciences. If we're going to rely even more on journals as publication venues, we'll need to recognize materially the effort it takes to run them, which is right now often largely dependent on the kindness of scholars. Better support for volunteer editors might allow them to address the backlog of processing that has produced unfortunate delays on which tenure decisions may hinge, and I believe such funding is properly provided from the same campus research budget that builds labs.

The importance of the digital domain to this entire discussion is too obvious to merit elaboration, but it is hardly the "silver bullet" that will single-handedly resolve a crisis in scholarly communication. We need to be able to determine what is of value to us in our colleagues' work, regardless of how it is packed or disseminated. And I think there are many features of our present "naturalized" system that will still be important in 2010.

First, Peer review – This is how scholarly publishing distinguishes itself from the publishing world at large, whence follows its credentialing function. This fact also figures heavily in acquisition decisions at university libraries. The problem with the current structure of university press publishing is that we have made the market one of our peers. We can reduce the market's role through subsidy; although, as I noted, that could be a problematic step. It will certainly be essential, however, that as university presses, learned societies, and university libraries explore digital publishing, peer-review remains an essential element of the process, whether we're talking about thematic research collections or an electronic repository of titles accepted by a blue ribbon committee and printable on demand. That ought to satisfy concerns about the academic credibility of digital publication where, furthermore, peer review is even more extensive after the fact, thanks to greater accessibility, than is the case with print.

At this point I want to emphasize, and celebrate, the critical role of learned societies and their journals in assuring a robust capacity for re-reviewing peer-reviewed publications. This function, essential in the past, will only become more important as the range and form of publications expands with digitization. Some societies, such as the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, have, through the digitization of their own journals, begun to provide arenas where the intellectual interrogation and validation of digital publishing can take place.

Second, Accessibility – Here's my Buddhist kōan for the day: If a monograph is published and almost no one reads it, can we call its publication an act of scholarly communication? Our system does not just distribute publications, but makes them accessible though complex, standardized and well-developed cataloging and citation systems. The formal symmetry of book and serials publication has made this process relatively straight-forward in the print domain. The easy distribution of digital publications holds great promise, but we have only just begun to develop shared tools and best practices for documenting digital publications and all their protean forms.

Third, Continuity – I mean continuity in two senses. First, preservation: we need to be sure that the works researchers cite will be available to future researchers. This is a daunting problem in the print realm, a challenge with filmed and taped materials, and even more formidable for digital works. Preservation of digital material is one issue that I am sure will need to be addressed by John's cyberinfrastructure commission.

But I want to stress another necessary element of continuity this morning and that is the need for new forms of scholarly communication to maintain continuity with the deep structures of knowledge developed by scholarship. There are important questions to be resolved, for example, when digital publications incorporate representations of not just archival material, but of entire archives, whose organization may not conform to broadly accepted standards.

The requirements of peer-review, accessibility and continuity establish a threshold for the digital publications and productions that are certain to be a major element of the research library of 2010. But it is one we can cross. The ACLS History E-Book Project is just one example of the exciting initiatives already well advanced, many of them funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, that have incorporated all of these qualities into its operation. The cooperating university presses carry out peer-review of new publications. "Backlist" publications digitized for inclusion in the collection are selected by scholarly committees and/or learned societies. And the whole collection has a citation and searchability structure compatible with both standard print publications and with "born-digital" works.

Such projects, however, do not come cheaply and would have been impossible without a great deal of Mellon funding. But the History E-Book Project will be self-supporting and, indeed, profit-generating, in a remarkably short time. Why not think about providing a similar stake to university presses, perhaps in partnership with university libraries, for digital initiatives? Create a consortium (the CIC provides an excellent foundation for such efforts) with pooled contributions from each institution to jumpstart the collaborative building of digital repositories or other electronic projects.

So: Stay calm. Embrace complexity. And, finally, **Proposal number 3: Be of good cheer**. I see every reason for optimism if we continue to work collectively and retain the best features of our current systems. It is beyond my own capabilities to sketch the already evident intellectual potential of new technologies for the humanities and social sciences, but what I can affirm is the value of a balanced, blended, and multi-pronged approach. It will recognize that not all scholarly projects should take the form of books; that not all book-length projects need to appear in print; that properly vetted electronic publications should be taken seriously; that the recognized substantial costs of digital production will have to be supported, perhaps consortially; that the role of peer review and the learned societies will continue to be crucial; and that faculty and administrators will need to be more willing than ever to evaluate on their own the quality of their colleagues' work. It can be done. Thank you.