Can a publishing house divided stand?

James Curran

Last week’s decision by Melbourne University to overhaul its publishing arm and thereby seemingly restrict its focus in future to academic texts has opened up something of a fault line in Australian intellectual life.

On the one hand, some academics believe that MUP was prioritising so-called “airport trash” over serious scholarship. They say that the move will see normal programming resume – normal programming, that is, from last century, when, by and large, MUP predominantly launched scholarship from the academy. On the other, a smorgasbord of eminent scholars, political figures and a host of other contributors to Australian culture, have in private and in public lamented the imminent demise of a distinguished publishing house, which, under chief executive Louise Adler, engaged and influenced the wider intellectual life of the nation.

Perhaps one of the more fanciful claims to emanate from some academic quarters is the view that MUP was somehow closed to scholarly work. That its doors in Carlton were barred to those wanting to translate their academic research into book form.

Such a claim is, to say the least, spurious. Consider this statistic: of the 154 titles published by MUP from 2015-2017, 94 came from academia. Some of these titles appeared in the MUP academic monograph series – with each contributing to and embellishing crucial debates within disciplines and universities both here and overseas. They are on reading lists for university students.

The essential aim was this: the commercial works published by MUP were to help sustain its ongoing publication of works from the academy. And in many cases, MUP was able to transform scholarly research into accessible content for the serious general reader. This was the model.

Of course, not every title on MUP’s list would be something that I, or some colleagues in university departments, would be curling up with in front of the fire on a wintry eve. That, however, is beside the point. It is a matter of individual preference. Is not the maxim “each to their own” at the very heart of humanity and the humanities? Flicking the switch to stratospheric snobbery will do little for the image of academics in the broader community. All publishing houses in this country are being buffeted by technological and other winds. They can either hunker down and retreat from the gale or venture out and try to stimulate public debate – via the works of scholars or other social, cultural and political commentators.

What is too often forgotten is that the kinds of works that attract the sneer of some in the academy are not only works enriching the national conversation today, they will inevitably attract scholarly inquiry in the future. Memoirs or analysis of recent and contemporary politics, for example, constitute nothing less than the first draft of history. In the passage of time, they will be the first ports of call for scholars attempting to understand this era. Take Chris Bowen’s study of former treasurers, The Money Men. Bowen may well be treasurer again following the next federal election. Does a case have to be made as to why a work of this kind is of deep significance to the intellectual life of the country?

A personal declaration is required here: MUP has published three books of mine since 2004, one of them co-authored with a colleague from Denmark, Stuart Ward. These were serious, scholarly works on Australian political culture here and overseas. All of them wrestled with weighty debates inside the academy: nationalism, identity, decolonisation, political leadership, aspects of culture – civic and popular – economic history and foreign relations. But they were also, like so many other works of scholarship here and abroad, trying to shed new light on contemporary dilemmas.

It has been passing strange, too, to read that Melbourne University now aims to mimic the model of Cambridge or Oxford University Press. Both, however – like Adler’s MUP and Yale, Princeton and Chicago – publish a mix of narrow and broad appeal books. It allows them to compete with commercial publishers.

Yet there are no indications these great publishing houses are about to bring to a grinding halt their trade lists to focus solely on academic works. Only a fool would dispute the place pure scholarship occupies: along with teaching it is the very lifeblood of universities. But there is also a wider public hungry for works by scholars, journalists and public intellectuals that help us contextualise the temper of our times. Up until last week, MUP was fulfilling that mission to Australian readers.

Sadly, the iconic MUP logo – the winged goddess of victory holding her book – has just had her feathers clipped and her nib blunted.

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