

The Curious Case of Academic Publishing

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Abstract

The recent controversy over The Edwin Mellen Press lawsuit against McMaster University librarian Dale Askey is considered a symptom of a larger problem: the unsustainable demands from the academy itself which have created a market for publishers like Edwin Mellen. The overproduction of doctorates combined with the relentless demand faculties place upon their members to produce publishable research — as well as sometimes rigid gatekeeping of acceptable scholarship — have contributed to the creation of a lucrative market for “alternative” publishing venues — many of them of questionable quality and reputation. Until academic culture changes to admit fewer doctoral students and to judge quality over quantity when conducting tenure reviews, the market for academic publishing will only continue to grow, thereby presenting librarians with an increasingly complex collection management problem.

Keywords

academic publishing; Askey, Dale; Edwin Mellen Press; gatekeeping; predatory publishers

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The by-now infamous lawsuit against Dale Askey, Associate Librarian at McMaster University, brought by The Edwin Mellen Press in response to a 2010 blog posting of Askey's, has attracted international attention and laudable condemnation from a host of professional organizations, including CLA, ALA and CAPAL. The suit was filed in response to a blog entry entitled "The Curious Case of Edwin Mellen Press" in which Askey advised his colleagues to save their precious acquisitions budgets by eschewing the "dubious" publisher and the "egregiously high prices" that it charges for its titles. Although the original \$4.5 million lawsuit naming both Askey and McMaster was later dropped in the face of opposition, the personal suit naming Askey alone still stands (Ruf).

It has been extremely encouraging to see the extent and rapidity with which librarians

and others have responded to this as a matter of academic freedom and free speech, and how the mainstream media have recognized the importance of the story.

For my part, I have in the past steered students to Mellen publications, as some titles have filled a unique and timely information need. I would, therefore, be reticent to simply eliminate an entire stock of titles from consideration based upon that publisher's reputation. My purpose, however, is neither to dispute nor to support Askey's position on Mellen; rather, I'd like to suggest that Askey was merely addressing a symptom of a much larger problem: one that goes far deeper than just a questionable level of scholarly oversight at an overly-litigious publishing house. Instead, we need to recognize that all of us — librarians, faculty members and graduate students alike — are struggling to contend with a burgeoning problem that lies at the core of the entire academic enterprise.

That a publishing house like Edwin Mellen Press has been as successful as it has (besides, of course, charging exorbitant prices and then paying no royalties to its authors) is because there is clearly a great deal of demand for its services. Authors who have been otherwise unable to attract the interest of larger academic presses and who are seeking to bolster their credentials, have turned to EMP in significant numbers, just as they have to academic "author mills" like VDM Verlag, which actively solicits recent graduates with targeted emails, promising to "publish" their theses and dissertations but without all the "hassle" of actually editing and producing them. So too have some scholars — seeking to increase the number of publications on their CV to bolster their promotion and tenure applications — submitted their work to the growing array of "academic" online journals and vanity publishers, some of them dubious and others outright predatory (see Beall).

This demand arises from the unsustainable economics of the academy. In many advanced economies, far more doctoral students are being graduated than can be absorbed by the marketplace (Cyranoski et al.), while those that do secure faculty positions are relentlessly mandated to produce frequent publications and to secure research grant monies.

The result, as British pharmacology professor David Colquhoun noted in a 2011 Guardian article, is that it is no longer possible for peer review to function as it once did — there just aren't enough qualified reviewers to do it. Citing a survey showing that in 2006 alone 1.3 million "peer reviewed" articles were published in 23,750 journals, Colquhoun observed that universities have only themselves to blame for this glut, as they are applying tremendous "official pressure to publish when [authors] have nothing to say" (Colquhoun 2011). The reality, however, is that much of this vast scholarly "avalanche" goes essentially ignored and uncited (Bauerlein et al 2010).

This glut is also engendering enormous personal and institutional costs in the academy, not only in terms of the time taken to conduct the necessary research but

also to read and review submitted manuscripts — to say nothing of libraries maintaining ever-more expensive subscriptions to the surging population of journals, and determining how best to expend dwindling book budgets — the very dilemma which, of course, prompted Askey's original blog post.

Even as this mass of scholarship is being produced and published, each discipline also erects formidable gatekeeping functions to shape what is deemed to be acceptable scholarship and what is proscribed, creating an often irreconcilable tension between the demands to publish on the one hand and the unwillingness on the part of some academic journals and publishers to admit new, challenging or unpopular ideas on the other — an interconnected web of ideological barriers that reaches from search committees to publishing houses (Miheusah 34). The pressure to conform to disciplinary expectations so as to further one's career is often irresistible, with the only alternative being to publish outside one's discipline in "low impact" journals, in vanity presses or in less stringently-guarded open-access venues.

When taken together with an industry already undergoing rapid change as a result of mergers and consolidation as well as competing e-book formats and open source platforms, the result is an inexorable disruption at every level of traditional scholarly communication models.

To slow this deluge, Colquhoun suggests that the academic culture needs to change. In addition to accepting a self-publishing model that invites anonymous comments from colleagues, departments should advise their faculty to publish no more than two papers per year, to hold only one research grant at a time, and not to stress publishing in "high impact" journals as a means of promotion and tenure (Colquhoun 2011). Taylor (2011) argues that further reform is needed in doctoral programs themselves, advocating an abandonment of ever-more specialized doctoral study in favour of consortial and cross-disciplinary models aimed at addressing real-world problems.

The present model, by contrast, is clearly unsustainable, and among its many consequences is a vast market for articles and books that the academy insists be produced but whose presses and journals may not themselves be interested in publishing. Until universities re-orient their tenure-granting criteria to relax onerous publication expectations on the part of faculty, and to accept alternative reviewing processes for the research conducted within their walls, we will continue to see the proliferation of sometimes questionable publishing venues seeking to capitalize on a valuable market which universities have themselves created and nourished, thereby presenting librarians with an increasingly complex collection management problem.

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