

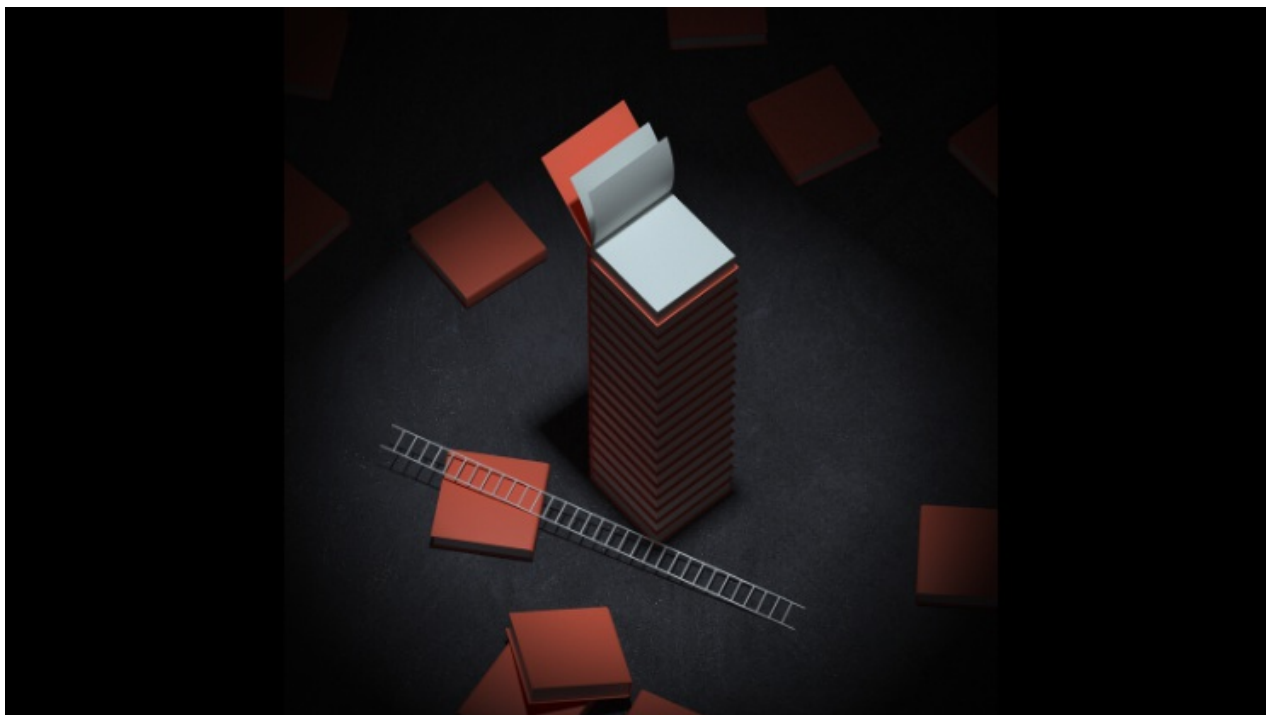
Democratising publishing or dodgy spammers? What 'inclusive' publishers tell us about the state of academic book publishing.

*In disciplines where the academic book is the primary means for communicating research and establishing oneself in the field, academics may have a mental shortlist of desirable publishers. However, not everyone can access the most elite or reputable presses, and so some choose publishers with less supposed academic 'credibility'. Some publishers get accused of spamming authors or other so-called 'predatory' practices. Drawing on a recent study, **David Mills** and **Natasha Robinson** explore how these practices and choices reflect a commitment to accessibility that challenges traditional models of academic publishing.*

We have all received these emails. They begin 'Dear Professor', and after a line or two of flattery, invite us to submit a book manuscript, an article or an edited collection. These messages quickly fill up our inboxes and junk folders: spam to be deleted rather than read. But perhaps we are too quick to judge. What if our judgements about academic credibility are entangled in histories of disciplinary elitism, geographies of institutional privilege, and economies of knowledge exclusion? Our [research](#) has sought to understand how entrepreneurial academic publishers and their authors negotiate the gatekeepers of disciplinary credibility.

[Take, for example, Lambert Academic Press](#) (Lambert), and [Cambridge Scholars Press](#) (CSP). Each had invited us, by automated email, to publish an edited collection of conference papers. We returned an invitation of our own: to participate in our research. Representatives of both companies were happy to be interviewed, as were many of their authors. Keen to hear a diversity of voices and experiences, we sought out authors affiliated to universities at the geographical and symbolic margins of the world's higher education systems. Many CSP authors had some form of affiliations with European universities; for Lambert, most of the authors we approached were based in Africa. We adopted a position of [methodological relativism](#), aware of the strong [emotive judgements](#) and normative discourses that exist within the academy about so-called 'predatory publishing'.

Lambert is one of 17 academic imprints of Omniscryptum, a Riga-based company that describes itself as 'one of the most disruptive players of the book publishing industry'. Founded in 2002, Omniscryptum has published 300,000 books in 15 languages, using print-on-demand technology and digital marketing, and claims to have ambitions to develop further imprints in a range of African languages. Several imprints, including Lambert, specialise in publishing doctoral dissertations. The offer is appealing: there are no charges, authors are promised a quick and straightforward process, and books are listed on Amazon and other web-portals. There are no peer-review or copy-editing services, and decisions are made in a few days. The business model relies on selling a few copies of each book, often to authors themselves, and there are generous royalties available for those who sell more than 600€ of books each year. Omniscryptum prides itself on contributing to what its representative called the 'democratising' of publishing.



Most Lambert authors we spoke to agreed with the importance of opening up knowledge production. They were impressed with the company's customer service, the speedy opportunity to 'get their work out there', and the possibility of global recognition. Visibility was more important than academic credibility for these authors, even as their universities greylisted publishers like Lambert, in some cases dismissing them [as 'fake' or 'predatory'](#). One Kenyan academic with 17 Lambert books to his name, credited the publisher with 'putting people from nowhere, the periphery, the villages, on the map'. Yet he also complained that the \$80 cover price was exorbitant, and excluded African authors. Some suggested that 'you have to start somewhere' and that this was a first step on the journey to 'getting published in more renowned publishers'. For a Nigerian scholar, simply the print quality meant that Lambert 'had the edge' over local publishers.

CSP, in contrast, is based in Newcastle and operates at a different scale, publishing around 800 books a year. It too actively solicits submissions, and promises a 'fast, friendly and fair' review process, with publication in 3 months. Around 80% of manuscripts – the majority in the social sciences and humanities – are accepted, with decisions made by an in-house editorial team who filter out 'the mad and the bad'. Again, authors are responsible for formatting: CSP's justification is that authors 'retain control' of their work. New books are published in hardback at between £50-80, and authors are paid 5% of all royalties. One author described CSP as 'kinder and more inclusive', reflecting a conscious strategy on behalf of CSP; 'I'm not sure we're going to win the reputational battle with CSP,' their representative admitted, 'which is why I've tried to shift the battle onto a different front: inclusivity, diversity.' Yet another author however labelled CSP as 'spammers but not dodgy'. Some UK and US-based authors complained about their marketing and publicity – 'if you want your book read, don't publish with CSP' said one. Authors from beyond Europe were attracted by the associations of the name, its UK base, the existing profile of authors, and their discourse of inclusivity and diversity.

What should we make of the rhetoric of democratisation, decolonisation and inclusion that these publishers and their authors espouse? Their models, like that of other new monograph publishers, challenge the status hierarchies that structure the humanities and social sciences, with elite university presses at their apex. As one interviewee astutely noted, 'putting a Routledge wrapper on an Ashgate book makes it a "better" book.. putting an OUP wrapper on would make it better still.. putting a Lambert wrapper on would make it a "worse" book.' Their work also supports broader [calls for bibliodiversity](#) and more multilingual publishing.

For scholars unable to access existing cultures of academic credibility, scholarly recognition and digital visibility are an appealing alternative. Whilst CSP has steadily acquired symbolic and reputational capital over time, Lambert rejects 'traditional' markers of disciplinary legitimacy. It also [firmly rebuffs](#) the strident academic rhetoric around so-called 'predatory publishing'. And perhaps Lambert's authors are not being [duped or preyed](#) upon by a 'fake' publisher, but instead are making informed, strategic choices. Excluded and marginalized, they trade credibility for recognition, and swap status for speed and visibility, sharing their scholarship in alternative ways and for other rewards. Amidst the increasing commercial consolidation of the global science system, such publishers offer an alternative model of academic knowledge production and circulation.

*This post draws on the authors' article, [Democratising Monograph Publishing or Preying on Researchers? Scholarly Recognition and Global 'Credibility Economies'](#), published in *Science as Culture*.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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