

Scholarly publishing is broken: Is it time to consider guerrilla self-publishing?

by Blog Admin

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Aimee Morrison has been congratulated and gained professional credit for 'publishing' her article in a high profile journal. Except, her work will not be printed for another two years. She writes that commercial publishers are exploiting academics' desire for reputation against a true public good.



Scholarly publishing is broken – at least journal publishing, and at least in my experience—and I don't want to be complicit in this brokenness anymore, just because it serves some of my purposes, some of the time.

Most loftily, we scholars imagine that we are creating new knowledge, and that new knowledge is a good thing, that it can move our collective human project forward, in some small way. It gets moved only once this new knowledge is publicized. Hence, scholarly publishing.

Much less loftily, scholarship is a kind of labour that we exchange for tokens of esteem, power, and reputation, the currency of the academy. The recognized coin of this realm is peer-reviewed, published pages. Hence, scholarly publishing.

I know that I want to create new knowledge, and change the world! And if I can get a full professorship into the bargain, as well as win the disciplinary and institutional pissing contests by which goods are allotted within the Ivory Tower, well, all the better.

These goals can conflict. And so it is that I find myself in the weird position of having an article scheduled to appear in *Women Communication Scholarship* (pseudonym) and am ambivalent, even angry, about it. My little story indicates at least one small way that scholarly publication is broken, and how some of it is our own damn fault. Is my fault.

What's making me angry is that I submitted to this journal because of its high reputation, its high rejection rate, its mass adoption by academic libraries ... and it turns out that they have a standing two year delay on publication. Let me be perfectly clear: once you go through the [whole year of being reviewed and re-reviewed](#) and your piece is accepted, your publication date will be **two further years in the future**. I expressed some shock to the editor when she sent me my August 2014 publication date, in April 2012. She is shocked, too, having witnessed the creeping commercialization of this work over a generation of editorship. But this delay is their new standard. They have a perpetual backlog of submissions and accepted papers, because of their impact, and because they are published by a commercial publisher, who will not let them clear this out with some double print issues, they will have a two year delay for the rest of the world.

Now, I work in new media. My article will be about three years old when it finally appears. Older, actually, because it's based on a survey that took some time to complete. It will be historical by the time it appears. It's going to be out of the page proofs stage by September of this year, then sit in a digital drawer for two more years before it gets printed. As the bemused editor wrote to me, the brave new world of academic editing of commercially-published journals "both requires that we publish scholarship and that we don't publish scholarship."

This seems really, really wrong.

I consulted Twitter. My friends and colleagues in digital humanities were appalled. Some suggested pulling the article and submitting it somewhere with a faster turnaround. Some suggested back-door self-

publishing—that is, use the citation information from the “forthcoming” journal and put the paper online somewhere so people could read it before it becomes irrelevant. I like this idea of guerrilla self-publishing.

I consulted my chair, who consulted my dean. They, by contrast, congratulated me on having my work “appear” in such a high profile venue, and told me to leave it there. I should not retract the article to publish it elsewhere with a lower impact factor, just to get it into readers’ hands. I could put it on my CV, they said, and it would ‘count’ this year. So I will get a raise for heaving my work into a deep well. I must confess I like this idea, too, of appearing successful and important among my peers, and getting a raise, to boot.

To summarize: I get lots of chest-beating institutional credit for this “publication.” But no one actually gets to read my scholarship. It all leaves a very bad taste in my mouth.

This current publishing system is broken. It pits our desires for reputation and stature against a true public good, and removes the whole thing from academic hands to place it into commercial ones who have been quite canny at exploiting our desires for status and our lack of desire for detail work in marketing, bean counting, and publication.

As for me, I’m leaving the article where it is: this is the third journal I’ve submitted it to (it’s [interdisciplinary](#) and I have had the misfortune of getting one glowing and one damning review every where else it’s travelled) and I really want this work stamped with approval and circulating, however distant the future in which that happens. As a compromise between my ambitions and my scruples, I asked the editor if I could put a “pre-print” online, and she said it’s technically not allowed but that she understands, informally, that many other people do it. Nudge-nudge, wink-wink.

I ask you: if an article falls into the Taylor and Francis journal system and no one gets to read it, is any new knowledge created? If we’re all circulating these papers “pre-print” why are we bothering with these commercial publications at all, except for personal professional gain? And what should we do?

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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