

## The ironies of academic publishing: The system is stupid and it's time for a new manifesto

by Blog Admin

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*Stephen Casper and his father both published their respective academic text and novella in the same year, yet his father's novella costs a fraction of the academic text and is available electronically. If publishing a book is the academic promised land, [Stephen Casper](#) asks why we don't learn from those already self-publishing?*



Dive into the archives of the Royal Society of Medicine in London, and it won't be long before you come across letters pledging to subscribe to monographs. What are these epistolary sources? Long before it was a commonplace for academics to publish books with university presses, scientists and academicians supported the publication of monographs by soliciting purchase agreements from their friends and colleagues. Fifty or sixty individuals would agree to buy a book, and in this way many of the classic studies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century found their way from publishers into university libraries and private collections.

Times have changed. But academics still publish books. And in history, for example, the academic monograph remains the game changer. Over the last three generations, the monograph has so risen in stature that it has become the [hallmark](#) of mid-career achievement and promotion within university systems. The monograph is the global standard of academic success. An historian might publish [fifty articles](#) in a lifetime of effort, but without a book, his or her colleagues would typically regard him or her as a scholar who never realized their full promise. The book is the promised land, and for many young scholars their doctoral dissertation is the road map for getting them there (never mind what this guy [says](#). Oh and similar thoughts about museums [here](#).)

Prospective authors need to acquire a rather remarkable habitus in their pursuit of book-publishing in academia. The Department of History and Philosophy of Science at Cambridge University accordingly offers excellent advice on how to fashion a dissertation into a seemingly book-worthy project. They [note](#) that it is often informal networks that achieve the desired end:

*"Some presses prefer authors to approach them through personal contacts; cold submissions are disfavoured. Others do not encourage communication through private channels. Talk to supervisors and those who have previously published about the vagaries of each publisher."*

They also observe that authors should prepare themselves for a "frustrating time lag" after they submit their first prospectus.

From the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to *Inside Higher Education*, the myriad advice columns that have focused on publishing the first academic monograph all call attention to the fact that a dissertation is different from a book. Indeed this fact might be called the first cliché about academic publishing. Again the Cambridge HPS column advises that:

*"Your thesis may lose quite a lot of material before publication, especially in a history PhD. Complex footnoting, for example, which works to establish your credentials in the PhD, is not necessarily essential in a book."*

These facts conjure up the first irony. Generally academic books are supposed to possess sustained arguments, be mildly revisionist, and appeal to a wider community of scholars. A newly-minted PhD supposedly finds that the work he or she has slaved over for as long as a decade doesn't qualify for any of these categories.

But an ethnographer of academia might be forgiven for immediately pointing to evidence against these claims. Firstly many dissertations are [reviewed](#) and many are published by [ProQuest](#). It seems likely that the same academics who review those dissertations as book proposals – the people who create the frustrating time lag – could be found eagerly checking out ProQuest dissertations in their own university libraries and greedily acquiring the knowledge of their junior colleagues. Were there really no market, then it seems unlikely that ProQuest could survive at all.

But the ironies do not simply stop there. If efforts to make books appealing to a wider market really succeeded, then it seems likely that authors would not have to find subventions for books, pay professional indexers, and sometimes pay professional copy-editors (at the American Association for the History of Medicine I actually met two individuals who have made lucrative careers by providing essentially ghost-writing services to academics). And by the way – this pay structure is truer for the sciences.

But even when authors manage to pay to do all of these things, academic books remain expensive for institutional and individual purchasing. It is common for academic books to sell for more than \$50.00. And in book series prices can be much greater. Books published for instance in the Routledge Series in History of Science, Technology, and Medicine, which are often excellent and important works, are regularly priced higher than \$125 – well out of my price range and I imagine their books don't sell well in the Global South. Such prices could be taken as an indication that there is little difference between the market for dissertations and academic monographs. In other words, the clichés seem somewhat overwrought in comparison with market conditions.

There is no good reason for this system any more. In the same year that L. Stephen Jacyna and I published [The Neurological Patient in History](#) with Rochester Studies in Medical History, my father self-published his novella [The Far End of the Park](#). Both of our books have nice covers. Both of our books are beautifully typeset. Yet his book costs a fraction of ours and is already available for electronic readers. Ours is expensive and not yet available electronically.

Now in the instance of *The Neurological Patient in History*, a number of points can be attributed to the higher cost. The press poured a great deal of energy into the volume. Edited volumes are notoriously tricky to make cohere together, and we benefited enormously from all of their work. So these observations are not sour grapes. Nevertheless when my father's book is compared to our book, the difference between the two is impossible to spot. And that is a third irony.

Of course there would be real perils if academics began self-publishing without some systems of peer-review in place. Yet in the case of converting dissertations to books, one could hardly argue that a system of peer-review has not been in place. Either the *viva* process works – *or it doesn't*. And if scholars feel it doesn't work, then that raises many different issues that have less to do with publishing and more to do with graduate education.

But we can push this issue further. My father's book actually generates income and at a much higher percentage than any academic book would for any author (I'm not saying he's making money). Many complain that academic studies have no evident value. The recent fervor at the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) is just one example among many of the conservative clichés (discussion [here](#)) that routinely denigrate good academic work on the basis that supposedly no one cares about it. The experience post-graduate school actually seemingly validates those conservative gripes; shopping a book prospectus can be a totally humiliating experience, especially because the book supposedly passed academic muster already and sometimes even won a prize along the way. What better way to answer the critics than to point to the existence of an audience for academic work. The determinants standing in the way are gatekeepers in publishing and the exigencies of the professional publishing world – which frankly have nothing to do with scholarship.

Naomi Schaefer Riley – may her name live in infamy forever- was quoted in [The Huffington Post](#) as saying:

*"I read some academic publications ... but there are not enough hours in the day or money in the world to get me to read a dissertation on historical black midwifery. In fact, I'd venture to say that fewer than 20 people in the whole world will read it."*

That just shows how incredibly stupid Riley is and how backwards current trends are in contemporary academic publishing. Factually I am quite certain that I know at least one hundred people who would buy a book on black midwifery (see the AAHM group Facebook page). I suspect that [globally](#) there is an audience approaching approximately ten thousand customers for a book on that topic (there are 5000 [midwives](#) in the USA alone), provided it were priced correctly, marketed via social networking, and readily available for download (7 billion people means there is whole big market for ideas). Riley is clearly no medical historian; people are voracious readers. It is just that most readers can't afford (or won't pay for) a \$75 dollar book. But they are interested, and the world of academic publishing is actually preventing them from accessing those books.

So here's the picture: young academics – often [broke and being exploited](#) as adjuncts – have been told that their dissertation qualified them for a PhD. Their work is being disseminated in articles and by ProQuest. Others are already making use of their ideas, and idiots like Riley make fun of their lack of success (which has nothing to do with the merits of their scholarship). Meanwhile, academic publishers (and their reviewers) are telling young academics that their work is simply too niche and too scholarly. Moreover, if the young academic succeeds in publishing, then their ideas will be locked up forever in a monograph that not only pays them next to nothing for their labor but also makes their ideas far too expensive for most members of the academic community across the globe to purchase.

Meanwhile, their senior colleagues admit that it is becoming harder to publish monographs, but they continue to insist that the path to academic advancement is publishing a scholarly monograph with a university press. That is, by the way, a fourth irony. So even as my father can publish his book in a global market with a vanity press and sell it at a fraction of the cost while reaping a higher percentage return personally, junior academics who have had their dissertation peer-reviewed can't.

### **Putting it mildly – this system is stupid.**

There may be a path forward here. The issue remains that monographs need to be peer-reviewed. It seems therefore necessary for academics to change with the times and create not-for-profit, peer-reviewer networks. These networks would rigorously peer-review works in exchange for a small percentage of sales from the first two years following publication. Such networks would be charged with making sure that the authors and reviewers have no preexisting relationship. The percentage would be paid to reviewers as an incentive for them to their jobs well.

These systems of peer-review should also be open, along the lines of, for example, the [BMJ publishing group](#). Authors would know who their reviewers were and reviewers would know who the authors were, and it would be expected that they would form a positive relationship (such as [Dissertation Reviews](#) encourages between their reviewers and authors). The peer-review networks would only authorize books that had passed muster with all reviewers and such networks would work as mediating authorities in circumstances where there were irreconcilable differences between parties.

Authors would self-publish their works, but the reviewer networks would provide a page for each book that acknowledged that it was a work recognized by a community of scholars and the peer-reviews of the book would be published online so that scholars could compare the finished product to the original reviews. Thereafter, the author would be responsible for marketing the volume. In a world of blogs, [twitter](#), websites, and social media, the returns to the author would be invariably higher. But, more importantly, the return for readers would be even larger, since books that would have been formerly priced out of reach or not available at all would now form a part of the library collection of humanity that is the internet. It really is time for [academia 4.0](#).

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

*This post was originally published on Stephen Casper's own blog '[The Neuro Times](#)'.*

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