

DEBATE

Scholarly Vanity Press: Why You Should Judge the Book by its Cover

I recently wrote an article about scientific publishing (1) where I discussed the possible future demise of the traditional scientific journal. A couple of months later I was contacted by an acquisition editor from a publishing company in Germany that had found my article interesting and now wanted to offer me their publication services. I pretended to be interested and asked them to send me some more information. What I read in their proposal is something that is becoming increasingly common in academia but equally something to be wary of. In recent years, vanity publishing – to pay a publishing house to have your novel bound and published – has become a simple way for an aspiring writer to see his or her name on the book cover. Nothing wrong that, but when the print on demand industry starts to look towards academic theses, red flags should be raised.

The process of producing a PhD thesis varies between countries but what is universal is that you work hard for years and end up with a bound copy of your work. Whether your thesis is an anthology of your published papers like in Sweden, or a monograph like in the UK, the achievement is just as great. Therefore it is important to discuss the risks involved in the type of proposition that was presented to me by the German publishers. In short, what they offered me was print on demand of my PhD thesis, the personal assistance of a dedicated editor, an International Standard Book Code (ISBN) to enable worldwide wholesale distribution, and royalties of every sold copy. This may sound attractive to anyone not reading between the lines of this proposal, but beware. First of all, I doubt my thesis on the transcription pattern of parainfluenza virus 5 would exactly fly off the shelves at Barnes & Noble or Waterstones, so my royalties would be negligible. Secondly, and most importantly, this type of solicitation of my academic work would mean that I turn over the copyright to my own thesis, the cornerstone of my research career, to the publishing company. This may give the appearance of a padded peer-reviewed publishing history but is a dangerous path to tread as an

academic in a world where everything is about prestige. These publishers sell the printed on demand books to high retail prices but fail to disclose that the majority of these theses can be found freely online. For example, my thesis can be downloaded free of charge both from the University of St Andrews Library and the British Library, so why buy it at a high cost from Amazon?

Imprints of the publishing company that contacted me also sell printed collections of Wikipedia articles. When they explain their philosophy on their website, they state: “Of course you can have everything online free of charge, but for good reason you have decided for a book”. They also add that they “...add internet in form of a book”. A quick browse on Amazon US and UK show that these Wikipedia books can cost as much as \$270 (a book on Wall Street). So if you’re looking for a new book to read over Christmas and see a grammatically incorrect sticker on the book cover saying High quality content by Wikipedia articles, don’t click Buy!

On a different note; the other day one could read the bizarre story in the Guardian about the computer researcher who had an article entitled Get me off your fucking mailing list accepted to an open access journal. The article, originally written by two American researchers in 2005, consists solely of the words *Get me off your fucking mailing list* repeated over and over again. When Dr Peter Vamplew, a computer scientist in Australia got fed up with receiving junk emails from the International Journal of Advanced Computer Technology, he submitted the paper and was surprised to say the least when it was accepted a few weeks later. Although subjected to ‘a rigorous peer-review process’, all Dr Vamplew needed to do was to add a few more references and do some reformatting - and pay the \$150 publication fee.

REFERENCE

1. Norsted H. The Death of the Scientific Journal? Acta Derm Venereol 2014; 94:5.

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