

THE CASE AGAINST THE CONVENTIONAL PUBLICATION OF ACADEMIC AND SCIENTIFIC BOOKS

by

Steven James Bartlett, Ph.D.

Homepage: <http://www.willamette.edu/~sbartlet>

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This brief essay is an attempt by a so-called “established” author to pass on a group of realistic and practical publishing reflections and recommendations to authors and would-be authors of academic and scientific books. These reflections and recommendations are the vestiges of 50 years of publishing experience during which this author has endured and survived the writing or editing of more than 20 books and technical monographs. During this long period, publishing has changed very dramatically in ways that are increasingly clear to both authors and readers, as well as to their publishers: Printed newspapers are rapidly vanishing, as are many professional printed journals, printed magazines, and, of course, many printed books. However, the increasing consciousness of the ongoing technological changes that are affecting publishing does not always lead to a change in the actual behavior of a great many authors, would-be authors, or their publishers. There is always an inertial lag like this when a revolution occurs, as is most certainly occurring today in the world of publishing. In this essay, addressed primarily to academic and scientific authors, I’d like to summarize some of the main factors that in fact influence these authors, and then contrast these factors with those that *should* influence them when they make choices how to publish their books.

There are a number of reasons that motivate academic and scientific authors to seek out, submit to, and satisfy the

requirements of “conventional book publishers,” and by this phrase I mean publishers whose business it is to manufacture and sell books printed on paper. These factors include the “cachet” that does in fact rub off on a book by virtue of its having been published by a well-known, brand-name publisher. This cachet is not to be underestimated. It can lead readers and acquisition librarians to purchase a book simply because a particular publisher’s name appears on the title page and spine. A book’s publisher-cachet automatically elicits for many readers and librarians a pre-judgment that such a book must be of high quality. The cachet also influences academic and science administrators to “count” a book authored by a faculty member or employed scientist due to the bias of administrators to rate, in advance, a book’s merit based on the *imprimatur* that a brand-name publisher stamps on it. As is well-known and well-accepted, this fact can particularly, of itself, play a central role in the job security, promotion, and tenure decisions of a college or university. The cachet of the publisher is equated with *prestige*, which is believed to be transmitted to a book, and hence to its author, by virtue of that cachet. This is of course wholly irrational, but such is the world as we find it.

Another factor that very often plays a major role in adding to this cachet results from a publisher’s advertised reliance upon *peer review*, which has become today’s gold standard of an author’s claim to professional credibility, competence, and professional recognition. Peer review and editorial bias, both in academic and in science publishing, have grown to exercise monolithic dominance over the fashions, tastes, interests, and research paradigms that act as a sieve through which book submissions are poured. (This is equally true of academic and scientific *papers*, which fall outside of the subject of this essay.) What manages to pass through this sieve is very often forced to conform to what peer reviewers and editors *like to believe*

and *are willing to accept*. In other publications, I have done my best to cast carefully weighed doubt on this usually unquestioningly respected but untrustworthy practice (e.g., Bartlett, 2011, 2017). In my own experience, and in that of many authors who have described their encounters with peer review and editorial bias, the “sieve” often succeeds in filtering out more creative, more original, more revolutionary works, leaving a residuum that conforms to the tastes and vested interests of peer reviewers and their editors. This is a phenomenon that we should, of course, expect—but not bless.

Another important factor for many authors who consider submitting their books to conventional publishers is, of course, monetary. They hope to derive some royalty income from the hard hours they have devoted to researching and writing their books. Some authors *do* make a significant amount of money in this way, most often as a result of writing books of wide popular appeal, such as investigative books about celebrities and politicians, novels and non-fiction books that capitalize on current popular fears and concerns, books of action and suspense, romance and sex, mystery, etc. However, authors of academic and scientific books seldom derive appreciable income from their published books (unless they write textbooks, which also falls outside of the concern of this essay).

Publisher-cachet, its influence upon one’s employer, the professional respectability bestowed upon peer reviewed works, and potential monetary gain are the main reasons authors of academic and scientific books choose conventional publishers.

When they make that choice, they sign contracts that are *essentially restrictive*: An author who signs on the dotted line gives to his or her publisher the rights to his or her labor—which can be no little thing, representing, as it often does, long periods of time, sacrifice, and dedication through research, thought, and writing, and then time and

labor spent in satisfying the often micromanaging stipulations and requirements imposed by a publisher and its staff of peer reviewers and editors. Once the book is published, most academic and scientific authors are at the publisher's *mercy*—in having to rely upon the publisher for such things as competent promotion and advertising of the book; timely and responsible distribution of the book to an adequate number of reviewers; effective, widespread distribution to bookstores; and regular, responsible accounting and payment of royalties when due. These are links in a chain; often, in my experience, some of these links with some publishers are weak to non-existent.

The restrictiveness of a book contract will, very frequently, come back to haunt an author in the years after the book's period of initial sales is over. Most academic and scientific books experience peak sales for a year or two, and then sales rapidly drop off. Within often no more than half a dozen years, the number of sales usually trickles down to very few. This phenomenon tends to be magnified—that is, the period of a book's decline in sales becomes ever shorter—in relation to the increasingly high prices publishers charge for the books they publish (something else that authors very seldom have any say about).

Once the glow of a newly published book has melted away, authors who continue to believe in the importance of their works and their books' potential contribution to their fields—despite sales that are quickly and asymptotically approaching zero—will often tend to become justifiably disappointed and frustrated. This is especially true of authors who have become aware of the degree to which their works can potentially reach a very significant number of interested readers—*if only* the publisher would allow their books to be re-issued on an *open access* basis: in other words, made freely available to any and all readers who have access to the internet.

However, and unfortunately, many publishers will stubbornly and with incredible hardihood hold onto a book with a death-like grip for many, many years, well beyond the period during which the book has actively sold. These are publishers who are so rigidly committed to profit-driven policies, even when books are scarcely selling or no longer selling at all, that they will adamantly refuse to relinquish the rights to a book. It may be abundantly crystal clear to an author that, because his or her book has reached the stage that it is only selling a copy or two each year (or less), it simply cannot pay for a publisher to keep its contractual grip on the book and to refuse an author's appeal for a release of rights, which would permit the author to make the book freely available as a downloadable online publication. But this crystal clarity in the author's eyes may very well not carry over to the vision of the publisher's rights department, which may be very reluctant or even categorically opposed to give back the rights to a book to its creator, *despite* non-existent sales.

To meet this eventuality, but only in a manner that is so feeble as to be utterly worthless to a great many authors, the United States has passed laws that provide for "*termination of transfer*," allowing authors to repossess rights to their own books which they have signed away (even in the case where their book contracts may appear to disallow such repossession). The statute, however, requires—hold your hat!—that authors *wait at least 35 years* to exercise their rights to terminations of transfer, and even then, authors must remain on their aging toes so that they can serve the publisher with timely notice—which must be between two and 10 years *in advance*.

At this point in this short essay, perhaps I might share some potentially informative data from my personal publishing experience. I'll describe my experience with a few of my previously published books, which I hope will help to drive home the points I've already tried to make. Two of

the following publishers granted a reversion of rights, and two refused. Here is what happened with each:

In 1987, I published a non-fiction “trade” book through Contemporary Books: *When You Don’t Know Where to Turn: A Self-diagnosing Guide to Counseling and Therapy*. Shortly after the book was published, it was adopted by a two large book clubs, and sales were doing well. Then, Contemporary Books was sold or taken over by McGraw-Hill, and, for reasons never communicated to me, distribution of the book stopped, and shortly thereafter, without prior notification, I was surprised to see “remaindered” copies of my book for sale on discount counters of neighborhood drugstores! Soon afterwards, the book was declared out-of-print. — Ironically, all of these things transpired during a period when sales of the book were at their very highest. Yes, the ways of publishers are inscrutable, and sometimes outright undependable.

Eventually, after a few years, the internet was born, and I then requested and was granted a reversion of rights to the book. I donated the book to Project Gutenberg so that the book could be made freely available as an open access publication to any and all readers. Within the first 30 days, some 2,000 copies of the book were downloaded by Project Gutenberg readers. In the years since then, the book has been steadily downloaded, day after day, month after month. Nothing like this could have been expected had the book remained in print.

In 1992, Elsevier Science Publishers brought out a collection of technical papers edited by me, *Reflexivity: A Source Book in Self-Reference*. The book was expected, I’m sure, by both Elsevier and me, to have limited sales. We were not disappointed. (The price of the volume did not help; it currently sells, used, for about \$350.) Eventually, sales diminished to such an extent, Elsevier granted me a reversion of rights so that I might make the book freely available to readers as I’d done with the first book I’ve de-

scribed. Because of its technical nature, I made the book available through PhilPapers, an online archive devoted to philosophy. The publisher's willingness to grant a reversion of rights has evidently benefitted scholarship: At the time of this writing, some 1,000 copies of this book have been downloaded, many more than were ever sold in printed form.

I turn to a third example from my own experience, but of a different sort: In 2005, I published through Charles C. Thomas what may, as of the present time, be the most comprehensive scholarly study of human destructiveness and aggression, *The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil*. It is a substantial volume of more than 200,000 words. Some books have an expected limited lifespan of relevance and application, while some have more enduring value. An author, despite his or her hopes, never knows for sure which of these will be the case. However, the book received outstanding commendations from the likes of M. Scott Peck, Irving Greenberg, Stephen A. Diamond, Douglas Porpora, and others. One reviewer stated "The subject matter of this treatise is far-reaching and profound, exploring the scope and depths of the human capacity for destructiveness and evil.... Psychologists and psychotherapists will find this a challenging and thought provoking approach that makes a significant contribution" (W.W. Meissner, M.D., University Professor of Psychoanalysis, Boston College, in the *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*). Another reviewer wrote: "This is certainly a classic work of reference in the field" (Dr. Marcus West, *Journal of Analytical Psychology*). —Such reviews suggested that the book perhaps has some lasting worth, and so it would make sense to allow the book to be made freely available to readers.

Within a matter of two to three years, sales of the book dropped to virtually zero. I therefore asked the publisher to allow me to make the book available as a free open access,

completely non-commercial, publication. My request was swiftly denied. Were the book to be made freely available, for example through Project Gutenberg, over a period of months or at most a few years, some thousands of readers might be expected to have access to the decade of research and writing invested in the book.

A fourth and last personal example: In 2011, Praeger published my book, *Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health: The Need to Look Elsewhere for Standards of Good Psychological Health*. Here, this book's rapidly declining sales were much like those of the previously mentioned book, a decline that is typical of scholarly and scientific books not specifically intended as textbooks. Praeger, too, has been unwilling freely to release the rights to the book, despite the fact that sales are now so miniscule they may not even repay the publisher for such costs as record-keeping and sending the author a non-royalty report each and every year. And much like my *Pathology of Man*, the book published by Praeger received commendations as a work of potential lasting value. About the Praeger book a reviewer wrote, "It could not be more relevant in our times.... Bartlett includes considerations and concepts that are seldom presented elsewhere" (Alejandra Suarez in PsychCRITIQUES).

However, both of these last two books might just as well have fallen into a black hole. Between the publishers' high prices for them, lack of publicity, and I do not know what other factors not under an author's control, both books are currently "imprisoned" by the refusal of their publishers to place their own for-profit commitments to one side and to contribute, with insignificant financial sacrifice, to the public good and to benefit scholarship, which were this author's original and only goals in writing them.

In the case of both of these last two books, I requested from the publishers either the termination of the in-print publication of the books so that I might make the books

available on an open access basis, or the right to make the books available *concomitantly* with their continued in-print commercial availability from the publishers. In connection with the second of these alternatives, there is increasing evidence which claims to show that full-text open access editions of books frequently can *increase* the net sales of their concomitant commercially printed editions. This evidence supports the view that making printed books simultaneously available as open access publications does not have a negative effect on commercial book sales, and may actually improve a commercial publisher's net sales. (For more about such evidence, see the Appendix.)

However, despite my attempts to raise the consciousness of the latter two publishers by directing their attention to this body of growing evidence, both remained unconvinced and were undeterred in retaining the rights to my books.

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In conclusion, my recommendations to authors and would-be authors of academic and scientific books are the following: To the extent that you can prudently do this in your individual professional career, seek to avoid undue restrictions on your capacity to engage in original thinking and to publish original work, by deliberately and selectively avoiding, whenever possible, the strictures and micro-managing mentalities of peer reviewers and editors. If your professional situation demands conventional book publishing, then, to the extent that you can, insist upon the contractual right to make your book available as an open access publication within a reasonable period after your book's publication in print. Failing this, request from your publisher either (a) a reversion of rights once sales have dropped to a financially insignificant level, or (b) the right

to make your work available on an open access basis concomitantly with the ongoing commercial printed edition. Failing this, make use of social and professional media to apply pressure on a publisher—who is subject to loss of respect from the public, libraries, its bookstore outlets, and its individual book-buying customers—for denying the public, academic scholarship, and science free access to books that are simply no longer selling.

Finally, for those of you who are “established” authors—who no longer need to accumulate “Brownie points” to add to your CVs in hopes of enhancing your job security or of strengthening your promotion- or tenure-worthiness—take advantage of online publishing, where your books can be freely accessed, read, appreciated, cited, and enjoyed by an open-ended number of readers, in perpetuity.



APPENDIX

On reversion of rights and evidence that concomitant open access publication of books does not undermine, and may improve, book sales

A small, clearly written book about the subject of rights reversion has been prepared for the Authors Alliance by Cabrera, Ostroff, and Schofield (2015). The book is intended to offer helpful, practical information for authors seeking to obtain reversions of rights to their books from their publishers. I strongly recommend the book.

In addition, the study, which summarizes numerous interviews with publishers, cites evidence relating to concomitant open access editions of a commercially printed book. Here is a short quotation from the study:

[I]n the course of our interviews, some publishers explained that they believe open access availability can increase sales of certain books. Additionally, the OAPEN Library, a European open access platform, published a study showing that open access availability increases online usage and discovery, and has no negative effect on book sales.... *The publisher's fear that book sales would decline if publications would be available in Open Access, was unfounded.* (Snijder, 2013, italics added)

The above claims of course require the support of strong evidence, and such evidence is increasingly available. For this, I refer to the work of Dr. Peter Suber, Director of Harvard University's Office for Scholarly Communication and head of the University's Open Access Project. Dr. Suber is an internationally recognized authority

on open access publishing. His book *Open Access* (Suber, 2012), has been translated into numerous languages and was made an open access publication by MIT Press one year after its publication. An open access edition of the book is available (see References). In what follows I refer to page numbers in that edition.

In Dr. Suber's book, evidence is cited that full-text open access editions of books can often boost the net sales of their commercially printed editions. There is already a significant body of evidence that appears to confirm this. The following will supply the reader with numerous citations to supporting studies.

In Dr. Suber's *Open Access*, Chapter 5.3 (pp. 106-112), see endnotes 8 and 9 (pp. 200-202), which provide a lengthy list of citations to supporting studies. Online updates and supplements to *Open Access* include references to additional supporting studies (<http://bit.ly/oa-book#p109>).

Dr. Suber maintains an Open Access Tracking Project that provides additional citations and supporting evidence relating to the experience of individual publishers in making open access editions of their publications available:

<http://tagteam.harvard.edu/hubs/oatp/tag/oa.books.sales>

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