



Independent Open Access Book Publishing 101

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In a previous editorial (Gelfer, 2009), I wrote about the economics of open access journal publishing. Specifically, I noted how a particular viewpoint expressed by Conley and Wooders (2009) glossed over some of the skills involved in open access publishing, and how this resulted at once in a devaluation of the publishing profession, and the co-option of free labor from academics. The outcome of this combination is that open access publishing can be seen as the privilege of those who can afford to support a volunteer economy. However, I am still an advocate of alternative publishing models, as demonstrated by JMMS being an open access journal. In this editorial I want to assume that we have made peace with the nature of volunteer economics, and offer some further practical thoughts not in the domain of journals (because this has been done in many other places), but books. Further still, I want to talk not about open access books in the increasing number of institutionally-supported open access monograph initiatives (important though they are), but genuinely independent publishing that is delivered not just online as open access content, but also via other channels such as print and Kindle.

My thinking on this subject was encouraged by the idea of writing a non-academic book about masculinity that could be written exactly as I wanted (in other words, not mediated by what a publisher believed they could sell), and that I could give away online. I was interested in the kind of impact that such a book could potentially have more than the cultural and professional capital that could be derived from a traditionally published book (whether academic or trade). With this in mind I drew up a plan for a book called *The Masculinity Conspiracy* (Gelfer, 2011), which I intended to give away for free online, posting each chapter as it was written and soliciting comments along the way that could directly result in the text being revised and inform the chapters that had yet to be written.

I started by registering the domain name masculinityconspiracy.com with a small hosting package (which cost about \$50 in total). After investigating several publishing platforms I settled on WordPress to deliver the content of the book. There are plenty of other possibilities, but I already used WordPress for a blog, so knew how it worked, and there are many people with WordPress accounts who could comment on the blog using their existing online identity. I posted the text of the first chapter online, breaking the text up across pages with somewhere between 500 and 700 words, so readers could comment on specific sections of the text rather than a whole chapter. I then went and let people know about the website, whether they be in my personal network, or by posting messages on subject-related discussion boards.

From the beginning the site received a modest but steady number of readers, some of whom left interesting comments which often took the text on unexpected tangents, and some directly went on to influence the text of later chapters. Indeed, for the first four chapters, everything went exactly as I would have hoped and expected. And then the site was hacked. I was unsure if this was a random occurrence, or something aimed specifically at me, but the text and comments were all deleted, leaving pictures of skulls and “got to hell” messages. My Internet Service Provider rolled the site back to a restore point before the hack, recovering the content, but claimed this was my problem (despite the fact that I was using the WordPress software they provided). One month later the site was hacked again, this time leaving messages in Arabic and pictures of Saddam Hussein. I took this hack more personally, as it was accompanied by emails questioning the size of my penis. Clearly, someone had taken significant offense to *The Masculinity Conspiracy*, which was at once most annoying in terms of the hack, but also rather exciting in terms of having clearly touched a nerve in the public domain in a way that is rarely achieved by orthodox academic publishing. As the ISP could not guarantee the hacking would be stopped, I moved the whole site over to the WordPress hosting service, which to date has remained untouched.

As I posted each chapter online, the trick seemed to be to continue letting people know about the site. For example, I was interested in engaging men’s rights advocates with the text, and posted news of each chapter on men’s rights websites: significant spikes of readership could be seen as a result in the WordPress statistics module. To give you some idea of the number of readers, in the past year the site has received about 20,000 page views, which is a small readership by popular standards, but good by academic standards.

Once the full text of the book had been posted online it became clear that despite the fact that it was being given away for free, not everyone was satisfied. Some of this was stylistic: some readers are happy with a dark background, others are not; some are happy with 500 word pages, others want the whole chapter on a single page. But also, some readers said they wanted wholly different formats, such as print or Kindle (and were willing to pay for these). So I investigated how this could be realized at little or no cost to me.

For a print edition I settled on the services of CreateSpace, an Amazon company. CreateSpace offers print-on-demand services that can produce and sell books one unit at a time, at no cost to authors. There are other companies that provide similar services. All that is required is to populate a Word document template with your text, adjust the formatting until it is satisfactory, fill in some information for a cover template (or design your own), upload the document as a PDF file, and away you go. CreateSpace provides an ISBN and barcode for the book. You can set your cover price within a certain range and earn a royalty on every copy sold via the CreateSpace website (a royalty significantly higher than a traditional publisher), or pay a modest fee and also make the book available for sale in all the usual online places. You can also then take that same document used for the print edition and upload it to Kindle Direct Publishing (another Amazon company), which will automatically convert the document to Kindle format within a few minutes and allow you to sell it via the global Amazon network within 24 hours (again, paying a

decent royalty on sales). Both the print and Kindle editions can be created at no cost with a skill set comparable to using Facebook.

Between the ability to write exactly what you want to write, receive immediate feedback from a variety of readers during the writing process, and being able to make the text available almost immediately in both print and Kindle formats, the whole idea of publishing with a traditional publisher becomes rather puzzling. Of course, there are other variables at play. First, not everyone is capable of producing a clean text without the input of a professional editor, so you will need to be honest about the quality of your writing skills. Second, the whole “build it and they will come” mantra that underpins much open access ideology simply does not work. Once you have built it, you must then let any- and everyone know about it. The key to success in such endeavors ultimately comes down to self-promotion. You have to be comfortable planting links to the website wherever possible, and finding creative ways to start conversations about the work (this is also true for promoting traditionally-published books), such as co-opting a journal editorial. I even have a masculinityconspiracy.com t-shirt that I wear to conferences, on airplanes, at school fairs and any other place where there are potential conversation captives: you’d be surprised at its effectiveness. Third, even if you manage to cause a flurry in the blogosphere with such an initiative, you will not be able to leverage it for a job promotion or grant application: it will not be taken seriously as a “real” publication.

In short, with current technologies it is possible to independently and at almost no financial cost deliver to the world a book-length text with great speed and the ability to genuinely respond to readers. It requires sacrificing some professional capital, but has the potential to generate new capital outside of the profession. I am not suggesting the traditional publishing process should be abandoned in favor of this independent publishing process, but it nevertheless offers a compelling complement that is worthy of serious consideration.

References

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