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April 3, 2011

### The Road From Dissertation to Book Has a New Pothole: the Internet

**Libraries' digital open-access rules make some editors wary of buying graduate students' work, although others see a marketing boost**



John A. Bowersmith for The Chronicle

Unless junior scholars limit online access to their work, says Ann Hawkins, she won't consider it for publication. A professor of English at Texas Tech, she edits a book series for an academic press.

By Jennifer Howard

Ann R. Hawkins, a professor of English at Texas Tech University, likes the idea of sharing research, but she's worried that sharing has gone too far when it comes to students' dissertations.

Not long ago, Ms. Hawkins heard from a junior scholar who wanted her to consider his revised dissertation for a series she edits for Pickering & Chatto, an academic press. She liked the idea—until she discovered his work was fully accessible on the Internet. Few would buy the specialized book, she worried, if much of its contents was already freely available.

"The problem I have is when anyone can either find the dissertation immediately on Google or by going to the university page and just clicking it and downloading it, whether they are in the United States or Taiwan," Ms. Hawkins says. Unless he could limit access, she told the hopeful author, she wouldn't consider it for the series.

That is not what any author wants to hear, but it's especially alarming for scholars at the beginning of their publishing careers. With jobs scarce, the pressure to produce a monograph that enhances their credentials is intense in many humanities and social-sciences fields. But more institutions now require master's and Ph.D. candidates to submit work in electronic form, and it appears that the rules could make publishing—and job-hunting—even harder, at least in some cases.

The digital push is being driven by an understandable desire to make scholarship, some of it supported by public money, easily available. And bits and bytes don't take up shelf space in

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### Past Coverage

[Requiring Theses in Digital Form: the First Year at Virginia Tech](#) - February 13, 1998

[Digital Dissertation Dust-Up](#) - April 28, 2006

### Recent News

#### Wisconsin-Madison to Release Professor's E-Mails but Withhold Those Said to Be Private

By Sara Hebel

Carolyn A. (Biddy) Martin, the university's chancellor, said it would not disclose records to the Republican Party that "fall within the orbit of academic freedom."

#### College Librarians Look at Better Ways to Measure the Value of Their Services

By Jennifer Howard

Instead of the usual data, libraries could collect information on what their users really need or how much they save scholars on citations, said conference speakers.

**Under Pressure, Edison State**

cramped libraries the way bound dissertations do. But several series editors and publishers echo Hawkins's concerns. "If authors have an opt-out option, I would recommend that they do opt out, at least until their first book is published," says Ann Donahue, a senior editor at Ashgate Publishing Group, which puts out a number of books that began life as dissertations. (There is a similar set of issues around journal articles.)

Others, though, take the opposite view: Digital dissertations stand a better chance of getting published because, if a work is viewed or downloaded many times, that can signal there's a readership for it. It's an issue "with more angles than a geometry textbook," says Patrick Alexander, director of Penn State University Press, in an e-mail.

#### Staying Offline

Brandon D. Shuler, now a Ph.D. candidate in the program of literature, social justice, and environment at Texas Tech, had his own moment of authorial vertigo brought on by a requirement that he submit his graduate work digitally. He holds a master's degree from the University of Texas Pan-American and just published a heavily revised version of his thesis, on the work of a Texas outdoorsman and writer, with a university press.

Mr. Shuler thought he had successfully navigated Pan American's thesis rules, which mandate using a digital repository but did—like the rules at many institutions—allow him to embargo his work for a limited period of time. He thought he had done that. "They can publish it automatically unless you go through this Barnum & Bailey, Ringling Brothers, three-ring circus of hoops," he says. "Then my publisher calls me and asks me if I'd had my thesis electronically published." His editor had stumbled on a copy of the work online and had jitters about its being readily available.

Mr. Shuler had to get in touch directly with ProQuest, the electronic publisher with which the vast majority of U.S. universities contract to house digital copies of dissertations, and get the company to restrict access. According to Mr. Shuler, the process took about a month. "I'm working on my Ph.D.," he says. "I really didn't have time to be doing all this, but obviously with a book coming out, I had to get it done."

ProQuest says it follows each institution's and author's instructions about how much of the work to make available (full text or abstract only, for instance), and on what schedule (immediately available, embargoed for a period of time, etc.). "We are the university's partner in dissemination," says Austin McLean, the company's director of scholarly communication and dissertations publishing. "We go by what the universities require. We have a highly customized embargo option for universities."

At the University of Illinois, the ProQuest agreement is one of the few areas that graduate students have had problems with since the university put into effect its new digital-repository policy, says Rebecca Bryant, assistant dean of the graduate college. Illinois receives about 1,200 master's and doctoral theses every year, she says, and no longer accepts paper copies. The digital documents are deposited in the university's repository, known as Ideals, as well as with ProQuest, which means that the student must also sign ProQuest's publishing agreement. "It's confusing to students, quite frankly, that they are basically asked to enter into two publishing agreements," Ms. Bryant says.

She adds that "there are still great benefits to using ProQuest"—having one's work listed in the major professional databases, for instance.

At Illinois, the default option is that work will go open access after two years; students may request an extension, although requests for a permanent embargo have to go through a special petition process. Since 2009, according to Ms. Bryant, 63 percent of graduate students have opted to make their work open access, about 20 percent have chosen campus-only access, and about 17 percent have chosen to keep their work off-limits altogether for now.

#### Publishing Dilemma

In the United States and beyond, there's a push for more coordination of practices and standards in this area. The Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations has been working since the 1990s to promote "the adoption, creation, use, dissemination, and preservation of electronic theses and dissertations," according to the group's Web site. Statewide ETD (for electronic



### College President Reassigns Controversial Administrator

By Jack Stripling

The college in southwestern Florida is in turmoil over an alleged discriminatory remark and the abrupt departures of several administrators.

#### Campus Viewpoint

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dissertations and theses) groups exist, and in May, the newly created U.S. Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Association will hold its first conference.

Having clear standards and policies may help students understand and navigate their degree and graduation requirements, but it is not going to settle the question of whether ETD's help or hurt their publishing chances. One publisher that views those chances as diminished by the digital availability of student work is Texas A&M University Press.

The press has become "much more reluctant to consider works based on dissertations than in the past," says its director, Charles Backus. In an e-mail, he described his concern that online dissertations might cut into sales: The press has come to assume that "most libraries and library vendors will not buy or recommend purchase of ensuing books that are based substantially on them," he wrote.

Ms. Donohue, of Ashgate Publishing, says she and her colleagues have similar concerns. The publisher does not yet have a firm policy in place regarding digital dissertations but has been thinking hard about the potential risks in recent months.

From Ms. Donohue's perspective, work that's behind a firewall of some sort doesn't really pose a threat. "We're really interested in the kind of open access where the dissertations turn up easily on a Google search," she says.

Other scholarly publishers, however, see no need to worry. Jim McCoy, who directs the University of Iowa Press, which publishes a mix of fiction and nonfiction books, views open access as an opportunity. "Any dissertation that's on the Internet and has taken on a life of its own, that would be a selling point to me," Mr. McCoy says. "That would mean there's a market out there for this material, and there could be an even greater market" for a revised, edited, well-marketed version published by a scholarly press.

The novelist and short-story writer Sara Pritchard also has an optimistic view of open access and dissertations. In 2007 she was working as the marketing director for West Virginia University Press when it decided to publish *Bringing Down the Mountains*, by Shirley Stewart Burns. The book was based on her history Ph.D. dissertation on coal mining. The document was in the university's repository, and a lot of people were looking at it. "We thought it was a good sign that her electronic dissertation was receiving so many hits (Shirley pointed this out to us) and that it boded well for sales of her book," Ms. Pritchard said in an e-mail. "And her book has sold extremely well (used primarily as a textbook on mountaintop-removal coal mining—which is a *big* controversy)."

The creative-writing community, whose graduate students tend to be keenly focused on publishing, has had particular concerns about ETD's. Ms. Pritchard's own career offers evidence that putting creative work in a digital repository doesn't necessarily get in the way of publishing it. She holds a master of fine arts degree from West Virginia and published a version of her M.F.A. thesis, a short-story collection, with Houghton Mifflin, just making sure to keep the thesis embargoed until the commercial book came out.

Mr. Alexander, the Penn State press director, says that for many presses, the decision becomes easier—and more likely to go the author's way—when the proposed book differs significantly from the graduate-school version. "The more crucial question for us, especially in the case of a dissertation, is whether the author can explain the extent to which and how the submission differs from the original version," he said via e-mail. A work written to satisfy a graduate committee should probably look very different from a book meant for a somewhat wider audience. That was true long before electronic repositories, and it holds true for dissertations in any format.

When scholars can show that they've reworked their projects with that in mind, Mr. Alexander expects that most university presses will remain open to considering their work. "The best advice I could give students ... is to remember that books and dissertations are two distinct species," he said.

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**procrustes** 4 hours ago

It is interesting that several of the "we won't publish it" crowd represent very specialized series from very high-priced publishers. These are exactly the kinds of works that should be put on the web freely because there is an insufficient market for them. Even libraries have cut back a lot on these kinds of works and will be cutting a lot more in the current environment. Few individuals (except the independently wealthy) are buying any of these books. If the budding scholars actually want their works to be read, they should welcome free electronic publication.

If they substantially revise and rework their dissertation, it should still be publishable. Dissertations are written for committees according to arcane rules, not for readers. Presses that publish unrevised or lightly revised dissertations are doing a service to none.

Like



**jvknapp** 4 hours ago

Northern Illinois University English Department's literary journal, *Style*, requires all accepted essays to remain embargoed from free Net publication for one year AFTER publication. In that way, we still maintain a subscription base, but at the same time allow relatively open access for those interested in reviewing earlier scholarship. Open access is not necessarily a completely positive direction for scholars in the humanities, as witness the article above.

JVK

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