

I'll see your open access and raise you two book contracts: or why the AHA should re-think its policy 5 Edit

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This week, I'm co-teaching with Lynne Siemens at the [European Summer School in Digital Humanities](#). Held at the University of Leipzig and directed by the esteemed Elisabeth Burr, it is an international gathering of scholars and students exploring the intersections of culture and technology. Lynne and I are teaching our Large Project Management and Development class. Lynne's been here before but I'm joining for the first time after leading the course at [DHSI](#) in Victoria.

As someone who co-directs an instructional school in the US (the newly renamed [HILT](#)), one of the incredible aspects of teaching in the European context is the number of students drawn from masters programs throughout the globe. Something like seventy nationalities and three dozen countries are represented here. And overwhelmingly, these are students who are completing their masters degrees and/or getting started with their Ph.D.

Yesterday, as we were teaching, I got a direct message from a colleague I went to graduate school with... a quick note with the subject line: WTF? Usually, when you get these types of messages from a former grad school colleague, it is a note that tells you a funny personal story or recounts some slightly horrifying episode in academic life. Sometimes, they are truly puzzling notes but often, it is an email designed to let off some steam about the pressures of the academy.

Which was why, when I opened the message, I was surprised to see no text, just a link to our joint professional organization, the American Historical Association. I've been a member for over a dozen years, although I've successfully avoid the massive conference that we hold every year. In part my avoidance has been cost. AHA holds its events in large cities that, as a graduate student, are quite costly. But also, I usually decide whether to attend once I've seen the program... and my particular historical interests outside of digital humanities (Native American history and Sport History) usually merit only a very small handful of talks that are relevant to my periodization and geography.

So I was shocked when I saw that the Executive Council for my professional organization had released a new policy on the Embargoing of Completed History PhD Dissertations. You can read the full text [here](#). The upshot is that they recommend a six-year embargo on your dissertation to ensure that you have an opportunity to appeal to a publisher for a book contract. The response from the history community, particularly the public history and digital history communities, has been vociferous. See Trevor Owen's [bizzaro AHA world](#) for a particularly comedic take on the issue.

My immediate response to this was astonishment that the AHA council hadn't done a survey of its members to ask for comment on the policy prior to the vote. That there was no statistics or citations to back their positions: 1) that a book is **the** terminus for historians and 2) that publishers aren't willing to entertain publishing a dissertation that had been released as open access. The list of assumptions embedded in that policy statement is too long to recount here but I do want to offer my own personal story of why I think this policy is bad for our profession.

I finished my PhD in 2010 at the University of Illinois. It was a fourteen year odyssey of writing that started with an undergraduate senior thesis, carried me through not one but two masters degrees, and culminated in a degree supported by a dissertation committee of incredible scholars: Adrian Burgos (noted Latino Sports Historian who has been simultaneously an academic historian and public scholar), Dave Roediger (an activist-historian who had led the way in scholarship on ethnicity, race, and class), Michael Giardina (a specialist in global sport, communications, and advertising), and Fred Hoxie (a scholar with a thirty year history of engagement as a public historian of Native American life.) My topic was one of public interest: Native American sports mascots.

Throughout the course of my dissertation, discussions about audience were key. The issue of the use of Native American symbols, apparel, etc. was of contemporary concern. The University of Illinois, the Washington NFL franchise, you name it, the debate over mascots was public and it was loud. When the time came to deposit the dissertation, a key element of our discussion was the fact that both the job market and the publishing industry had changed significantly since I'd started graduate school. I was entering a post-doctoral position in digital humanities and didn't know when I'd return to the dissertation. The opportunity to publish one's dissertation had declined as university presses faced fiscal difficulties. And the job market was full of ads for candidates who would teach four courses a semester with four preparations while simultaneously doing advising or service.

Coupled with the rising competition and a belief that I had something to say to the public, even if it was the academic public outside my committee, I published the dissertation inside the University of Illinois IDEALS repository, an open access depository. It was made available on May 19, 2010 as a download to anyone who requested access. Between May 2010 and April 2013, when I submitted my proposal to a publisher for consideration, it was downloaded an astonishing 604 times. While I can't say that these were unique downloads, the fact that 604 other people took the time to click "download" suggests that there was an audience out there that was interested in what I had to say.

When I got ready to write the proposal, a key element of my argument about why the Press should consider publishing the book was that I could demonstrate an audience that would be interested in buying the book. Why? My argument was four-fold: 1) printing a dissertation of 400 pages isn't something someone does lightly; 2) the dissertation did not include all of the pertinent illustrations that would be included in the book; 3) there would be a significant revision of the intellectual argument as well as the addition of a contemporary post-script that would aid readers in understanding the relevance of this historical tract to the contemporary debate; and 4) the general public, despite its open access state, hadn't actually had access to it as it didn't appear in the two most commonly leveraged search engines for reading material: Amazon.com and Google.com. In effect, I argued that to find my open access dissertation, you had to either know its title or my name or else be willing to surf through the onerous World Cat catalog to find and identify it. I made my case to the publisher on the fact that an academic audience was engaging with it already and that the general public, with the right revisions, would as well.

I got my book contract, even with the dissertation being open access and two of the chapters having been previously published in edited collections and journals. It was only after the book contract was signed, sealed, and delivered that my open access dissertation was embargoed. That embargo, a condition of publication with the Press, will last three years. After that three years, my unrevised dissertation will again become open access for those who can't afford to purchase the forthcoming book.

I agreed to embargo it now for a couple of reasons: 1) it's been out for three years so most of my colleagues in my sub-field will have already downloaded their copy; 2) after three years, it really does need revisions—my half-baked intellectual framework has become slightly more fully-baked; and 3) I know much more now about how to write for a public audience, so I want it embargoed while I improve the quality of the writing.

In my mind, open access gave me proof of an audience and an opportunity to gather myself (and get feedback from some colleagues and their students) while the embargo is now giving me time to fix it. The key for me, that AHA seems to have missed, is that getting feedback and demonstrating audience was key to getting the book contract. I didn't have to go out searching for readers to offer feedback or wait for an editorial process. By having my dissertation as an open access download, I was able to have random readers download it and then send me their thoughts. I've gotten emails, tweets, even been pulled aside at an unrelated professional conference by someone who found it when searching for something else and wanted to offer their thoughts on modernity. That, I say to my professional organization, is the power of the open access download for the early career historian. It gives us an opportunity to get feedback from those we normally wouldn't and gauge whether anyone is even interested in reading what we've written. Let's be real here: many dissertations will never make it to book form and, to be frank, given the expenses associated with book publishing for scholars, the book is moving even farther off in the horizon.

When I signed my contract, I estimated that I'd be spending roughly \$1000-1500 for indexing and image reproduction. I've got colleagues who double or even triple that number because of the type of scholarship they work on. Sure, that money is tax-deductible but that's a lot of cash for young scholars to lay out. And, with the cost of purchasing books skyrocketing, the financial hardship just keeps getting passed around.

So, when my major professional organization, puts out a statement that says it encourages a six-year embargo for the betterment of our job prospects, book prospects, and profession as a whole, I call bullshit. Bullshit, because they aren't actually making a statement about open access for the entire profession. They aren't recommending that established scholars hold their work from journals or conferences until they get their next contract. They are recommending that the most endangered among us, the newly minted PhD, play their odds. The odds are stacked against early career scholars...it is difficult to get accepted to the AHA Annual Conference Program, it is difficult to get published in respected peer-reviewed journals when you are just making a name for yourself, and it is extremely difficult to achieve that golden ring of the book contract. You've got to have the right topic, the right approach, and the time to write and revise your materials. Adjuncting at multiple universities, low-paying positions as post-doctoral scholars, the desire to work in the public sector, staff positions that don't grant you time to work on your book, these are all just a few of the common scenarios that early career historians face. And that is just those who want to stay in the academy.

And just in case, you think it was my topic that made open access make sense. Last week, Simon Appleford (a historian working in digital humanities at Clemson University) and I signed a co-author contract with a different Press. The topic of this one, "Getting Started in the Digital Humanities", was brought to the attention of the press, in part, by our open access creative commons digital humanities site, DevDH.org. I'll take your open access scholarship and double down. I've got two forthcoming books based off open access materials.

So, yeah, I find it problematic that a team of historians release a statement that suggests we should hold our thoughts to ourselves for six years. Six years is a long time to say nothing. It is, in fact, the time to the first tenure review for most historians. But, hey, I'm just a historian that works as a digital humanist who has not one but two book contracts. What do I know?