

Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large/Online Edition

Libraries • Policy • Technology • Media

Volume 14, Number 8: August 2014

ISSN 1534-0937

The Front

Once More with [Big] Dealing

Those of you who've already read the June 2014 *Cites & Insights* for something other than the old movie reviews in MYSTERY COLLECTION PART 7 and the snarky little pieces in THE BACK may have wondered whatever happened to *Big-Deal Purchasing: Tracking the Damage*.

There were delays. These things happen.

I am reliably informed that [this publication](#) (an issue of ALA's *Library Technology Reports*) will have left the printer on its way to subscribers by now (that is, by July 15, 2014). It should also be available in whole or in part in e-form from the ALA Store right around now. For details, go to www.alastore.ala.org/detail.aspx?id=11128

Inside This Issue

Words: Doing It Yourself.....	3
Intersections: Access and Ethics 3	34

Big-Deal Serial Purchasing: Tracking the Damage improves on *The Big Deal and the Damage Done*, bringing it forward to 2012 and using a more refined model. Here's the abstract:

When serials publishers first offered Big Deals to academic libraries, they seemed to many to be win-win-win situations. But while Big Deals did appear to lower the rate of serials price inflation, they did not bring it down to manageable levels—and in the process, they limited academic library flexibility. This study looks at the apparent damage caused by Big Deals over the period from 2002 (when most had been introduced) to 2012, specifically looking at details of acquisitions money for books and other acquisitions by type and size of library. Some possible approaches to improving the situation appear in the final chapter.

If your library *doesn't* subscribe to *LTR*, you should look into purchasing this issue as a separate. It's available as a complete document or in chapter-by-chapter pieces as an ebook.

This is an important study. It shows what serials pricing has done to the money available for not only other acquisitions—but also everything else academic libraries do. It's not a pretty picture, and it got uglier from 2010 to 2012.

The period chosen (generally 2002 to 2012, although the truly startling Figures 1.1 and 1.2 start in 1996, with all figures adjusted for inflation throughout the book) is one in which the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) used consistent definitions for all of the figures used in this analysis. (How startling are those initial figures? In 1996—following years of dramatic serials price increases—U.S. academic libraries as a whole spent roughly the same amount for current serials and for all other acquisitions. In 2012, academic libraries spent \$2.75 on current serials for every \$1 spent on all other acquisitions—and money available for all non-acquisitions purposes dropped sharply over that period.)

Big-Deal Serial Purchasing offers tables, graphs and discussions to flesh out the details of the damage across various types of academic libraries. It ends with a chapter suggesting some possible steps to improve the situation. The report is accompanied by a pointer to a PDF containing additional tables and graphs that didn't fit in the report itself.

Beyond the Damage: Circulation, Coverage and Staffing

This book complements the *Library Technology Report*, looking at changes in three other aspects of academic libraries from 2002 to 2012: circulation, coverage and staffing.

Here's the start of Chapter 1, to give you more of a sense of what's in this book.

Big-Deal Serials Purchasing: Tracking the Damage looks almost entirely at four aspects of library spending and changes in that spending: total spending, current serials, "books" (all other acquisitions) and the remainder—what's left over for staff, automation, preservation, etc.

This book looks at some other aspects of academic libraries and how they have changed from 2002 through 2012: circulation, coverage and staffing. It's designed to complement the *LTR* report. Indeed, I assume that readers will have access to the report, as it includes details on which academic libraries are included and excluded. This book uses exactly the same universe of libraries (2,594 in all) as the report.

I believe this book (and the supplementary PDF) will provide useful additional insights into what's happened in academic libraries over a decade in which Big Deals supposedly improved serials pricing problems—but still had serials spending taking more and more of a sometimes-shrinking overall pie...

For almost all of the rest of Chapter 1, to give you a better sense of what's in this book, please read the first few pages of [Cites & Insights 14.6](#).

Beyond the Damage is available in two versions, both containing exactly the same text and graphs, both from Lulu at the Cites & Insights Bookstore. The easiest way to find both is probably to go to Lulu.com and search for “Crawford Beyond Damage,” especially if you're reading the version of C&I in which hyperlinks don't work.

The [\\$45 paperback is 6" x 9"](#) and includes full-color graphs. It's 130 print pages (vi + 124).

The [PDF ebook version](#) is also \$45. That gets you explicit permission for multiple use and download from an institutional server: it's a site-license version. The PDF is *precisely* identical to the print version—only the covers are different.

I believe some academic librarians will find this book useful. I believe every library school should own a copy, but that's true for most of my books. In this case, the shrinking likelihood of future studies this broad and comparable makes the publication somewhat distinctive.

Words

Doing It Yourself

It's been a while since I discussed self-publishing here—at least five years, given that the tagged items here go back to June 2009. (I've discussed my own experience since then, to be sure, but I'm not a good example of self-publishing prowess.)

Back then, there was some confusion among self-publishing, vanity publishing and independent publishing. There still is, some of the confusion accidental, some deliberate.

Here are some other people's thoughts about self-publishing (and instant book production, a closely related topic), mostly in chronological order, with my own comments interspersed as usual.

Good Idea or Bad?

My answer, as you can guess, is “Yes.” But there are other answers and thoughts—and while various elements of this roundup should influence that decision (see specifically “By the Numbers”), a few items belong here.

Why I don't self-publish

That's Charlie Stross writing [on March 21, 2013](#) at *Charlie's Diary*. Stross is a full-time science fiction writer. He notes a comment thread on another post:

Of course, OGH has previously estimated that disaggregating the publisher's job would land him with 0.5-equivalent of management work, leaving us (and him) with only 0.5-equivalent of an author. That doesn't mean it can't be done, but there'd have to be a pretty good reason...

In other words: if you're a full-time writer and decide to be a self-publisher, you've effectively become a half-time writer. Stross expands on this for his own case.

Left to my own devices, in a good year with no major disruptions (which, alas, don't come along as often as I'd like) I can write around 200-240,000 words of finished fiction—a pair of 330 page novels or one big doorstep plus a novella. This assumes I'm working on lightweight novels that flow easily, or that my drill sergeant muse is standing on my shoulder shouting “gimme chapters, worm!” in my ear through a megaphone.

[Stross isn't a *prolific* writer. Kristine Kathryn Rush, discussed later, is prolific: she's said she writes two million words a year.] He says the science fiction trade publishers he knows produce roughly six novels per year per staff member—e.g., Baen has ten people and produces around 60 titles, Tor has 50 people and produces around 300 titles. But it's not even that simple:

[A] modern trade-fic publisher is an organization dedicated to handling the work-flow of book production. Over the past 30 years they've ruthlessly outsourced everything that isn't a core part of the job of publishing—including many tasks that an outsider might think were core competencies. Copy editors work freelance, paid by the book. Proofreaders ditto. Typesetting is carried out by DTP agencies. Printing is the job of a printer, not a publisher.

What remains in-house is “editorial” (managing the freelance copyeditors and doing acquisitions and perhaps true editing), marketing and accounting—and sometimes sales.

Stross figures it would take him three months per self-published book to handle all the publishing aspects. He doesn't want to do that.

Anyway: this is why I don't self-publish. Yes, I *could* do it. But it'd suck up a huge amount of time I would prefer to spend doing what I enjoy (writing) and force me to do stuff I do *not* enjoy (reading contracts, accounting, managing other people). The only sane way to do it would be to hire someone else to do all the boring crap on my behalf. And do you know what we call people who do that? We call them *publishers*.

But, of course, Stross *has* a publisher—and as long as the publisher's happy enough with Stross, that makes things easy.

More than 140 comments. After the first one points out that Stross is focusing on his own preferences, Stross quite sensibly responds:

Note I titled this entry “why I don’t self-publish”, not “why you shouldn’t self-publish”.

But, of course, not everybody’s happy with that answer, especially because some of them believe Stross could make *ever so much more money* if he did it himself (or hired people to do it for him). Stross explicitly says he doesn’t believe that to be the case. (The guy making the claim just can’t let it go, I see later in the thread.) I didn’t read the whole thread, but it appears that Stross is another science fiction writer who attracts thoughtful commenters. Even if some of them are so convinced that They Have a Better Way that they seem to ignore Stross entirely. There’s also one technogeek who comments, and comments, and comments, and is of course always right Because Technology.

Oddly, this is a case where I *did* read all the comments. Some of them are fascinating—including a discussion of the roles of editors. One commenter essentially didn’t want her golden words smudged by some hack editor; others basically said “that’s not how it works” and Stross offered more details. I’ve had cases (very few) where freelance copy editors really didn’t understand the work, and I didn’t accept the changes (noting that to my acquisitions editor), but—with one big exception, in a magazine column, not a book—in my experience editing and copy-editing have pretty much invariably strengthened my work without changing my voice or tone.

What the Golden Ticket Really Costs

This one’s from Michelle Boule, who’s a librarian but writes here as a would-be writer of a series of “fantasy romance” books—although I see she’s now calling them “historical fantasy.”

Since this post appeared [on May 20, 2013](#) at *A Wandering Eyre*, Boule isn’t rushing to get the book(s) out: The first one’s now targeted for 2015, and she apparently started working on it in 2011. This post discusses her current querying of publishers—mostly e-publishers that don’t require agents—and her mixed feelings about traditional publishing vs. self-publishing.

She discusses some of the numbers, citing other sources, and I guess I’d caution that the self-publishing numbers look great *if* you’re in a position to market the hell out of your books or already have a huge built-in audience. Otherwise, 10% of 2,000 sales through a traditional publisher really is better than 85% of 20 sales on your own.

As is so often the case with these discussions, I think there’s a strong “self-publishing is all about ebooks” slant, but maybe that’s me. (Clearly me: I read *lots* of books that don’t include much in the way of romance, and they don’t “feel flat to me.”)

Read the post and the comments. (I read one of the linked items, and found it useful in the distinction it makes between authors and writers: You're only an author if you intend to make at least a subsidiary living from your writing. By that standard, I may have been an author at times, but am back to being a writer. That's OK with me.)

How do traditionally published authors complete the sentence “Self publishing is...”? Their answers might surprise you.

This piece, by Paul Goat Allen [on June 3, 2013](#) at *blue ink review*, is what it implies. Allen, a reviewer, got a bunch of “established authors” (none of whom I've ever heard of, but that's me) to answer the question. In most cases, the answers are more positive than you might expect.

Worth a read, as are the comments (almost all of which are additional answers to that question). If I have a caveat, it's that self-publishing is still primarily about marketing—and authors *who already have established fan bases* are (unless they're self-pubbing under new pseudonyms, as some are) not really doing the same thing as people who've never had books published traditionally.

Why Self-Publish?

Laura Crossett offers an excellent answer to her own question in [this July 3, 2013 post](#) at *The New Rambler*. I'm tempted to just say “Go read this; it's a different perspective from an excellent author who's also a thoughtful librarian” and let it go at that.

It's no secret that I think Crossett's self-published book, [Night Sweats: an unexpected pregnancy](#), is first-rate. On a topic I never ever thought I'd read about, it grabbed me immediately and never let go.

I can't summarize her post very well; it's well written and thoughtful. Some of her reasons have to do with anger at publishers. Some, not. Crossett never expected to Make Big Bucks Through Self-Publishing (she's donating half of her net proceeds and the link I provide—to the Lulu paperback version—offers the most expensive option, still only \$10 for a handsome trade paperback).

You'll also want to read “One Year of Self-Publishing,” same writer, same blog, [June 13, 2014](#). She shows a monthly sales chart, notes that 515 “people or entities” have purchased the book (including 60+ libraries), notes that she's “rather stunned and flattered” since she mostly published it for family and friends—and offers lots of good advice. (Including a kind word for my micropublishing book.) One interesting tidbit in a worthwhile post: Even though the print book was only available at Lulu for the first months (before becoming more widely available), it has actually *outsold* the ebook version, 312 print to 203 ebooks. Sure, it's inexpensive—but the ebook version's even cheaper. Both are excellent.

My Advice to Aspiring Authors

“Rich and famous” Hugh C. Howey offers this advice in a [March 14, 2013](#) post on his eponymous blog. It’s fair to say that Howey’s very much on the “of course you should self-publish” side—although he does have the sense to say up front that “what works for one author may not work for another.”

Howey’s another one who says a writer must write *every single day*, which might be true (but I doubt it). He’s also fairly prolific, “writing and publishing several novels or short stories a year” across several genres.

He offers a bunch of reasons why “every author should *begin* their writing career self-publishing.” I think they’re worth reading—but the first two bothered me. (In case it doesn’t show, the first sentence of each paragraph is bolded in the original.)

Your manuscript won’t change. This is the biggest logical fallacy I see in the self vs. trad debate. The idea seems to be that if you self-publish, somehow your work drops in quality. It’s the same work. The words won’t change because of perceived association with what else is out there. Querying an agent won’t make your manuscript better. Self-publishing won’t make it worse. It’s either a story that appeals to readers or it isn’t.

Know your gatekeepers. Appealing to readers is the endgame. They want story over prose, so concentrate on that (aim for both, but concentrate on story). Agents and slush-pile readers are often the opposite, which is why they bemoan the absence of literary fiction hits and cringe at the sale of *Twilight*, *Dan Brown*, and *50 Shades*. You are writing for the reader, who is your ultimate gatekeeper. Get your work in front of them, even if it’s one at a time, one reader a month or year.

That first paragraph troubles me because of what I *don’t* see in the rest of the piece. He talks about the likelihood that you’re the publicist even with a traditional publisher. He does *not* talk about editing up front. Later he does mention that some people ought to invest in editing—but he also says flat-out that he didn’t invest a penny on that sort of thing until he was already raking it in. I’m inclined to believe that, if you’re publishing with a company that still deserves to be called a publisher, your manuscript *will* change for the better. Then again, that second paragraph makes it pretty clear that Howey’s not too concerned about prose quality, because us readers don’t care. Is he right for some readers (especially of the books/authors he mentions)? No doubt. Is he right in general? I’ve given up on more than one book because, although the story moved right along, the prose wore me down. But, again, that’s just me.

I see here, possibly incorrectly (I’ve never read any of Howey’s many, many publications), a strong sense of Good Enough.

Beyond that, it's worth reading, if only as a contrast to those who say that being a publisher and marketing are keys to successful self-publishing right from the start. If you know and like Howey's writing, you should especially read this and can dismiss me as a grumpy old fart.

More than 130 comments, many of them glad-handing; I didn't read them all.

The Gospels of Publishing

Jim C. Hines posted this [on February 9, 2014](#) on his eponymous blog. He begins by quoting from two advocates of very different views on self-publishing and says that such oppositions are mostly nonsense.

This whole Us vs. Them thing? It's bullshit. Traditional publishing isn't Evil. (Certain *individuals* within that system, well, that's another blog post...) Self-publishing and e-books aren't asteroids coming to wipe out the Dinosaurs. And there's no One True Path to success as an author.

Hines notes that he's been "crapped on" by a major publisher—but also gotten pretty decent ("mid five figures") book deals. He's seen friends move in both directions, from traditional to self and from self to traditional.

I'm doing rather well as a mostly traditionally published author, but I've had people come along to tell me how stupid I am for not self-publishing. They lay out math full of ridiculously flawed assumptions and generalizations to "prove" how much more I'd be making if I published my own e-books. It's possible they might be right—maybe I would do even better—but it's in no way a sure thing. They assume everything my agent and publisher do for me, either I could do just as well myself, or else it isn't really necessary.

He hasn't personally encountered quite as much of the "self publishing is nonsense" side—but he thinks that's because he doesn't do much of it.

The rest of the post is excellent, and I think you should read it in the original. He makes four quick bullet points and expands on one of them. He's pretty clear about not saying "ignore people on either side"—he's saying you shouldn't believe in One True Path.

The Vagaries and Variety

A few pieces on various aspects of self-publishing—and right from the start, we see that self-publishing even now isn't always PoD.

Authors rewrite the book on self-publishing

Remarkably, this article by Kim Ode, most recently updated [January 29, 2011](#), at the *StarTribune* (which I eventually discover is in Minneapolis, MN), is still available without subscribing or coughing up a fee. It's an

interesting, varied story, even if the online version does begin with a slight glitch in the tease line:

It's more popular than ever, but success depends on more than writing, marketing.

Here are the first three paragraphs—and you'll see later in this roundup (“By the Numbers”) that one item is highly misleading:

Not so long ago, the way to get a book published was clear: Submit your work, twiddle your thumbs, get back the manuscript, send it out again. Eventually, if you were very good, or very lucky, a publisher would bite and, eventually, you'd be holding a book, no longer a mere writer, but an author.

Today, the digital world has ignited self-publishing, changing everything. Why wait for New York when you can plunk down your money and get a finished book in just a few months?

Make no mistake: It will be your responsibility to market it. Many reviewers and bookstores won't take you seriously. And you may never earn back your investment, which could be as high as \$20,000. Is it worth it? Apparently, it's at least worth the risk. In 2007, about 134,000 books were self-published in the United States. In 2008, that rose to more than 285,000 and in 2009 soared to more than 764,000.

That third paragraph is problematic, although the first two sentences are true enough. That \$20,000 figure is *really* on the high side unless you're becoming a true publisher and want a good-size print run (or have been sucked in by the most rapacious vanity publishers)...and the last sentence is just wrong. It is *not* the case that more than 764,000 books were self-published in 2009: roughly 90% of that 764,000 figure is reprints, mostly of public domain books. The actual number of self-published books *with ISBNs* was somewhere under 77,000—impressive, but an order of magnitude smaller.

Ode goes on to discuss “contract publishers” in the Twin Cities—which is to say, either subsidy publishers or service agencies. That's where the \$20,000 figure comes in: that's what William Reynolds of Brio quotes as the price of “doing it right.”

There's a profile of Stanley Gordon West, 78 at the time, who somehow managed to get an unpublished novel turned into a TV movie...and eventually started traditional self-publishing, where you get a big run of books printed and then go try to sell them. (He sold the book out of his car and managed to sell tens of thousands of copies that way.)

It's amusing to see the section on the “changing perspective” of the traditional publishing industry—namely that *Publishers Weekly* started offering self-publishers a chance to be part of a listing for a low, low \$149.

This is almost entirely about traditional self-publishing and the (pricey) roles of local printers, but it's still interesting. I do like the final paragraph ("Duren" is another self-publisher who's essentially an independent publisher):

Duren sees a similar future as publishing becomes more decentralized. "I'm sure there are a lot of awful books that have been self-published—that reputation came from somewhere," he said. "But there are a lot of books published by traditional publishers that are awful, too."

Yep. Sturgeon's Law stands.

Publishing Without Perishing

This post—by David Streitfeld [on January 1, 2013](#) at the *New York Times* "Bits" blog—is just plain charming. It's mostly an interview with James Morrison (Adelaide, Australia), a 36-year-old editor and graphic designer who's a book enthusiast and cares about books and their jackets.

He kept stumbling across "obscure books practically begging to be reprinted" and finally decided to do something about it: preparing his own cover designs for these public-domain works and producing them through Lulu (with most sales on Amazon). His "press" is called Whisky Press, and he's not looking for big profits—he wanted to *own* copies of these books with attractive covers, and found that it took "an almost negligible amount of extra effort to make them available for others to buy as well."

As of the post, he'd published about a dozen books and is quite clear about it *not* being a way to make money: "I've spent slightly more on proof copies, etc., than I've earned through royalties." (Later, he says he may be a little ahead, but certainly no more than a few hundred dollars over two years.) That's partly because he prices the books to earn about \$1 via Amazon (more via Lulu), perhaps partly because he doesn't consider PoD books "quite as nice to hold and handle" as conventionally published books. The most popular book had sold 27 copies at that point; the least popular only two—but since it's an F. Scott Fitzgerald play that *can't be sold* in the U.S. because it's still under copyright, "maybe it's a surprise I've sold any copies at all."

To me, Morrison is a wonderful example of another great reason to use PoD—especially if you're capable of designing good covers: To put things in print that you think deserve to be in print. With essentially no overhead. (Most of his books aren't just PDF scans; he's apparently able to capture the text and "typeset" them.)

How to get your book in a library

Jamie LaRue offered this advice [on January 21, 2013](#) at *myliblog*.

You've written a book. You want it to be in your local public library. Why? Because you want to be read, and libraries are where the readers are.

After all, collecting books—gathering, organizing, and publicly presenting the intellectual content of our culture—is what libraries do. So all you should have to do is swing by the library, drop off your book (they might even buy it from you), and the next thing you know, the public will be clamoring for more copies.

Wouldn't it be nice if things worked like that?

He explains why they don't work like that. I might or might not agree with everything he says, but it's a good read. After discussing public library history and the present, he notes what libraries buy—which is mainly commercially produced, positively reviewed and carried by the library's distributor, which mostly means Ingram or Baker & Taylor.

His "tips for print" include one that makes me a *little* nervous, but that may be me:

Form a relationship with a reviewer. Take a librarian to lunch, find out which review journals she reads, and see if she knows any of the reviewers personally. Borrow a copy of the magazine, and find a reviewer who specializes in your kind of title. Send her a copy with a note saying that you admire her work.

But he thinks authors should do ebooks anyway—and asserts flatly that once people buy ereaders or tablets, "they tend to prefer the ebook to print." I don't think the case is that clear—and, frankly, given how much trouble libraries are having with ebooks in general, saying "here's a great book you can add *free* to your wonderful ebook collection" may or may not be successful. (On the other hand, he has Colorado-specific suggestions that I'm sure are workable.)

Binge Reading

Kristine Kathryn Rusch posted this fairly lengthy discussion [on March 7, 2013](#) at *The Business Rusch*. I know Rusch as a science fiction writer, but she does more than that; she's a prolific author and certainly familiar with traditional book publishing.

The post is largely about its title and the implications for authors, publishers and self-publishers. To wit: some readers binge-read just as some TV viewers, especially with Netflix, binge-watch. (I've noticed that some TV-on-DVD menus really cater to binge watching; for one season of *Smallville* on Blu-ray, the only really easy way to watch it was start to finish, all six episodes. I *don't* binge-watch; neither does my wife. That was a nuisance.)

I've certainly binge-read at times: I believe I read all of the James Bond books over the course of a week or two. More commonly, though, I

like to spread things out: I know, for example, that sooner or later I'll run out of Discworld books, so I'm savoring the seven unread ones on the bookshelf, knowing there may not be many more new ones.

But that's me: Every reader is different, just as every viewer is different. For binge-readers, at least in some cases, they'd love to have their authors produce four books a year, maybe even a book a month (or a week) to feed their habits. Traditional publishers have not catered to this desire, even for authors who clearly *could* write several books a year. (If you're a full-time writer with real facility and you have a stream of ideas, a book a month doesn't seem outrageous at all: that's only three thousand words a day.)

Rusch is discussing several different things here, including the fact that, as far as she could tell, six of the 25 ebook bestsellers in the March 10, 2013 *New York Times* list were self-published. That's a fairly astonishing figure (although, as she notes, some bestseller lists—including the *Times*—aren't that difficult to game).

Here's a key point, after she says she doesn't really know how these self-published authors (she equates "indie" and "self-published") made the best-seller lists:

Here's what I do know: each of the six indie authors on the *New York Times* list has published more than one book. The author with the fewest titles, Shanora Williams, published three titles since the end of November.

The other authors (and the two on the extended *New York Times* list) published at least four books last year. Some are indie-only authors, and others, like Marie, are hybrid writers, with books from traditional publishers as well as indie publishing their own titles. Some are newer writers who have just signed a traditional book deal (and I hope to hell their contracts are good).

What this shows is what those of us who have been in the business a long time already know: write a lot of books and readers will find you. In fact, if you're a good storyteller, then readers will anxiously wait for your next book.

But traditional publishers have typically limited authors to one or two books per year; Stephen King even made that a plot point. That's right: King's publisher wouldn't let him do more than two books per year.

Apparently the romance genre "broke that mold"—Harlequin favored authors who wrote six or more books per year, for example. (Note that most of those books are short novels, 50,000-60,000 words.)

So why do most traditional publishers restrict the number of titles? Rusch says it's because "it costs a lot of money to publish a book"—and the figure she uses astonishes me: about \$250,000 (\$5,000 of which goes to the author). Really? A quarter million bucks to publish a novel? If that's true—and I can't disprove it—it's no wonder traditional publishers

slow writers down. (On a \$25 hardcover, the publisher should net \$11.25 after 45% discount to wholesalers/Amazon/B&N and \$2.50 to the author. That means that “a book” has to sell more than 22,000 copies to break even. I find that hard to swallow.)

But, as Rusch points out, “indie writers” don’t need to slow down (and don’t spend much money creating books). Especially with series books, they can do four, six, twelve books a year—and for some readers, that will be wonderful.

Interesting stuff. So your best chance to make it as a self-publishing ebook fiction writer (and perhaps nonfiction as well) is to write a *lot*? Could be.

What’s the Problem with Self-Publishing?

This fairly long Josh Hadro article on [April 11, 2013](#) at *Library Journal* makes more sense if you add “and libraries” to the title—and, of course, that’s *LJ*’s audience.

The discussion of self-published titles in libraries has increased in recent years, in direct proportion to the angst surrounding ongoing ebook licensing negotiations with major traditional publishers. Prompted by the prospect of limited availability of popular titles or higher prices—probably both—librarians are understandably weighing alternatives that might satisfy readership demands.

There are, however, very real barriers that must be overcome before self-publishing is likely to be even a small component of many collection efforts. Some barriers will fall away naturally as this growing market gains momentum and filters its way into downstream publishing markets like libraries, while others will require a more concerted advocacy effort to overcome.

Hadro notes the stigma associated with self-publishing, “long synonymous with ‘vanity publishing.’” That *may* be changing. Then there’s availability (in this discussion, as to some extent elsewhere, I could fault Hadro for sliding too easily into the “as we all go ebook for everything” camp), and I find it hard to believe that libraries have “no recourse” for acquiring ebooks—although I’ll go along with “without going beyond their single-distributor comfort zone.” The third discussion covers “scale & discoverability,” which segues rather nicely into the “reviews” area, since (to my mind) the single biggest barrier keeping self-published works out of libraries is the natural stance that “if it ain’t reviewed in one of the major sources, we’re not gonna consider it.”

“Enthusiasm vs. demand” is a tough one: it’s hard to argue with the assumption that self-published works are—with a few obvious exceptions—not in as much demand as the easy repeat bestsellers.

I can't help but like "Consider a different approach," suggesting that libraries become involved in local self-publishing. I think I'd like it even if Hadro hadn't mentioned *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing*.

A good article still worth reading, as are most of the comments. There are, as would be expected, a couple of sneering comments about quality control, since, you know, 100% of public library acquisitions from traditional publishers are beautifully written, carefully edited and real contributions to literature. (Neither of them say that, but otherwise their points are, shall we say, blunted.)

25 Steps To Becoming A Self-Published Author

Chuck Wendig posted this lengthy screed [on September 3, 2013](#) at *terribleminds*. It's partly a response to "[25 Steps To Being A Traditionally Published Author](#)," a guest post on the blog. The two posts have one thing in common: Both writers swear a lot. But they also both have interesting things to say.

I won't attempt to summarize. Worth reading. If I paid attention to everything in that list, I might be more successful as a self-published author. Or I might have given it up as an incredible time- and money-sink. I do note that most advice on self-publishing seems to come from the fiction area, possibly because most recent big self-pub success stories have been fiction. Such is life.

Debunking the "Self-Pub Shit Volcano"—Not Shit, Nor a Problem, And is it Not Going Away

You think the end of the title of this [February 6, 2014](#) post by Nate Hoffelder at *The Digital Reader* should be "and it is Not Going Away"? So do I, but it's his blog.

There's been a story building over the past week about self-published ebooks. According to Chuck Wendig, the massive volume of self-published titles has resulted in a "shit volcano" of worthless content. Another blogger picked up the story, and then yesterday Mike Cane jumped in with the prediction that Amazon would eventually take steps to clean up the Kindle Store.

Hoffelder links to the posts. I tried to read Wendig's, but the sheer, um, elegance of his blogging voice soon got to me. (Odd how he thinks readers of *books* should be treated with enough respect for editing, but readers of blogs should suffer through zeroth-draft stuff. Of course I'm not a wealthy novelist who also publishes lots'o'books full of advice for other writers.) I admit to skimming the second and not even skimming the third.

Hoffelder doesn't buy either that there's a real problem or that there's any chance of it going away. I'm pretty sure Hoffelder's primarily looking at ebooks (after all, that's The Future, right?), but that may not matter.

Basically, he thinks it's all about discovery: "the problem is how to sort through the dross and find the good stuff." Which may or may not be an issue. I agree with Hoffelder that Wendig's test—"go look at 10 ebooks at random in the Kindle Store and see how many are terrible"—is silly. Hell, I choose new books semi-randomly at the Livermore Public Library, and probably eight out of ten fiction books are ones I know I don't want to read, some of them "terrible" by my standards. So what?

Some commenters agree; some don't. Those who don't are insistent that at least 90% of self-published books are crap. Which I don't doubt, as that leads us back again to Sturgeon's Law: 90% of *everything* is crud.

Yog's Law and Self-Publishing

John Scalzi posted this [on June 20, 2014](#) at *Whatever*. "Yog's Law" was coined by Jim Macdonald as a handy rule of thumb for writers and publishing:

Money flows *toward* the writer.

The next paragraph fleshes that out nicely:

This is handy because it will give the writer pause when she has a publisher (or agent, or editor) who says that in order to get published, the author needs to lay out some cash up front, and to that publisher/agent/editor. The author can step back, say, huh, *this is not how Yog's Law says it's supposed to go*, and then surmise, generally correctly, that the publisher/agent/editor in question is a scam artist and that she should run away as fast as her feet will carry her.

But what about self-publishing, where the author may need to pay for editing, copy editing, cover design and marketing? In those cases, "money is going to have to flow away from the writer."

Does that mean the end of Yog's Law? Scalzi cites and links to Harry Connolly (a "hybrid" author) who [thinks it is](#)—and you'd have to read his reasoning yourself. (It has to do with ebooks.)

Scalzi disagrees, but does offer a self-publishing corollary:

While in the process of self-publishing, money and rights are *controlled* by the writer.

That's smart and distinguishes self-publishing from vanity publishing and most "packages," where the author pays out money but doesn't really control the process.

Fifty-odd comments. One frames it differently: Money still flows toward the author—but when you're self-publishing, at some points you "take off your author hat and put on your publisher hat."

Some discussion of the notion that, if proceeds don't cover the money you put out with your "publisher hat," you may be engaged in vanity publishing—but, by some estimates, four out of five traditionally-published books fail to earn out their advances, and it's fair to assume

that at least some of those represent losses to the publisher. Losing money doesn't make you a fool; not understanding where your money is going and why...that's a different story.

Instant Books

What's the connection between print on demand and self-publishing? Smashwords and other ebook-only distributors might tell you there is none: self-publishing is all about ebooks.

While a self-publisher *may* choose to produce ebooks with no print equivalents (and, from everything I've heard, Smashwords is one good distribution system for such ebooks), many *also* want to make print books available, and that's where print on demand comes in.

I started to call this section InstaBooks—but a quick check shows that InstaBook is some sort of competitor to Espresso Book Machine, that is, a maker of print on demand systems for use in libraries, bookstores and elsewhere. While some items in this section concern such on-site instant book production (where “instant” is typically ten minutes or less), there's a whole other side of print on demand: behind-the-scenes production to serve pure self-publishing firms such as Lulu and CreateSpace, companies that fall somewhere between self-publishing and vanity publishing such as AuthorHouse and its many imprints, and the many traditional publishers that use print on demand to keep books “in print” after they've gone out of print.

What they all have in common is that each book is produced on a laser or inkjet printer (or some other sheet-fed one-at-a-time printer) with a cover produced on a color one-off printer. The self-contained machines handle page trimming, gluing and binding; print-on-demand service bureaus may handle those final steps as part of a single system or might do them separately. (Some print-on-demand services allow for hardback binding, e.g. Lulu, where a separate binding process is almost always involved.)

The result is always one book at a time, even if an order calls for 50 copies. That's as opposed to letterpress, offset lithography and other forms of traditional book printing, where hundreds or thousands of copies are produced in one multistep process using printing methods designed for quantity.

Some of the items here discuss local experience with instant books. Some raise issues about instant books. By the way, there's a *very* good chance that you've read or even purchased print on demand books without knowing that you've done so—especially if you've purchased a book years after it was originally published. In most cases, you won't know or be able to tell that you own a print on demand book.

Printing Books on Demand

This [November 17, 2009 post](#) by Brian Herzog at *Swiss Army Librarian* is mostly a good description of using in-house print on demand: in this case, the Espresso printer at Harvard Book Store.

Herzog liked the idea of using the Espresso to restore out-of-print books to a library, and used *The History of Chelmsford* as an example for three reasons:

- I knew it was in Google Books
- It is huge (almost 1000 pages) and I wanted to see how well the book-on-demand printer handled it
- It has text, maps, illustrations and photographs, and I was curious to see how they reproduced

The book in question is from 1917, thus in the public domain, so it was entirely legal to print a copy from Google Books. Reading that far, I said to myself “probably split into two volumes: most PoD systems can’t handle more than 700 pages or so.” That’s correct—and it meant that the process of getting the book made (normally wholly automated with an \$8 price point for Google Books books) was a little more complicated:

However, since the book I wanted was so long, everything was expanded: downloading alone took five minutes, and it had to be printed in two volumes, because the printer can only handle about 500 pages at a time. Since it had to be divided, Amanda [a Harvard Bookstore employee] had to find the best place to split the book, and then do some quick calculations to figure out how thick each textblock would be to make sure the covers fit properly. And due to the extra labor involved, my two books cost \$10 each, with the whole process taking about 40 minutes.

He offers other notes. In the case of this book, there were no ghost hands (an occasional problem with GBS’ fast scanning) but some pages weren’t cropped quite right in scanning. He thought the print quality was excellent, making the book quality scan-dependent. Back then, Harvard Book Store was producing 15 to 40 books a day—less than two months after getting the printer. And this one:

The paper they use is acid-free and feels slightly glossy. I asked how long they expect the paperback covers and binding to last, but it’s so new they’re not sure,

I’m a little surprised by the “feels slightly glossy,” although Harvard Book Store might be using something other than the typical acid-free multipurpose printer paper you’d expect to see.

Harvard Book Store *correctly* didn’t regard themselves as publisher for the books. They didn’t know how long the cover (and binding) might last because it was too new. In my experience, several years by now,

these books are as durable as trade paperbacks (and frequently have better paper).

I just checked from across the country: Harvard Book Store still has the cutely-named Espresso Book Machine (henceforth EBM at times), that is, “Paige M. Gutenberg.” HBS uses it to produce copies of millions of existing books (from Google, the Internet Archive, other sources and even publishers) and to produce *new* books that people provide, with the offer to sell the books at the bookstore. It appears that some books are now less than \$8.

My experience with the Espresso Book Machine

Chris Walters posted this [on February 11, 2011](#) at *Booksprung*, generally devoted to ebooks. Walters recounts an experience using the machine to produce a (current) book at an independent bookstore in Manhattan.

He describes the process and the results—in his case, a book with the spine text offcenter because an earlier operator had misadjusted the system. He notes that the operator offered to print a perfect copy at no extra cost.

Here’s the oddity—and it points up at least one difference between the Espresso in-house system and the kind of PoD that Lulu, CreateSpace and others use. He links to an OnDemandBooks FAQ for page limits; while that FAQ is gone, it’s not hard to find the info:

Books can be any trim size between 4.5” x 5.0” to 8.25” x 10.75” (11.4 cm x 12.7 cm to 21.0 cm x 27.3 cm). Page count can range from 40-830 pages on smaller trim sizes and 40-240 pages on the largest trim size.

That’s surprising in two ways: first, that the Espresso apparently *always* requires that pages be trimmed (that is, it won’t print an actual 8.5” x 11” page)—and second, much more astonishing, that the maximum page count for largish books is so small. By comparison, Lulu’s 8.5” x 11” trade paperbacks can be 32 to 740 pages long; the 740-page limit is across the board, while the minimum page count varies from 32 to 84 pages depending on paper quality and other factors. Putting it personally: I wouldn’t be able to use the Espresso machine to produce my *Cites & Insights* Annuals, both because those are a full 8.5”x 11” and because they’ve *always* had more than 240 pages.

But, of course, the Espresso has to be designed to minimize manual intervention, so maybe it makes sense that it has more restrictive options.

With This Machine, You Can Print Your Own Books at the Local Bookstore

This [March 13, 2012](#) story by Peter Osnos at *The Atlantic* is in some ways more of the same—except that the subtitle explicitly questions the economic viability of the EBM and, sadly, ebook bigots (those who

regard all print books as obsolete and to be shunned) show up in the comments.

The story is at least partly metajournalism, as it talks about *other* articles featuring the EBM. It discusses the background for EBM and the experience of the first bookstore with an EBM: Northshire Books in Manchester, Vermont. Northshire was now in its fourth year of using the EBM and says it can now “start measuring the Espresso as a potential profit center for the store.” The story also says that, at this point, Harvard Book Store was producing around 1,500 books a month—two-thirds of which were for self-publishers.

Then the story focuses on price: up to \$150,000 to buy a machine, over \$5,000 a month to lease—which sometimes leads to the provider, OnDemand Books, operating the system directly. There’s no real resolution here. Considering that there were about 70 EBM locations in 2012 and are now something over 80, it’s not taking bookstores and libraries by storm—but, as far as I can tell, most places that have one plan to keep it. (I see at least one California bookstore that chose not to buy it after a test period—and instead set up their own self-pub program with a local printer.)

Ah, but then there are the comments. I guess I assumed *The Atlantic* readers might be a bit more sophisticated. But no: the ebook bigots were out in force. The very first comment, other than noting a typo, says:

[T]his article is about completely meaningless technology; there is already superior tech that lets you read thousands of books on a single device. Google books has made all of the classics free, and everything else is cheaper and takes no materials. The Espresso is a horsewhip that builds itself on sale next to toyota corollas.

And, responding to that comment, another eb bigot:

That is just a printer combined with a binding machine. Pretty soon for a price of a single hardcover everyone will own an internet-connected electronic device with instant access to every title in existence. Hardcopies, bookstores and, most certainly the Espresso Book Machine are all but finished.

And another suggesting that the company that makes them might be able to “screw investors” during a six-year period.

For that matter, even one who claims to “prefer the real thing” thinks the EBM is pointless. (The original commenter comes back with a classic “Some of my best friends are...” comment.)

A range of other comments I’d love to fisk (one equates vanity publishing with self-publishing, one seems to assume that only a publisher can generate PDFs that the EBM could print), but life is too short. More recent stories on EBM include new installations at Books a Million! and other stores, ongoing services at libraries and more.

Falling out of love

This one—by Phil Gyford, posted [December 3, 2010](#) at his website—is a little different. Gyford was buying one volume of [Pepys' Diary](#) each year, typically from Amazon; the books are published (in the UK) by HarperCollins.

And he was surprised by the tenth volume. It “felt very different. Different as in ‘worse.’” He shows portions of pages from a previous volume and the new volume to illustrate the differences:

The new volume, again on the right, is much whiter. It's only when you compare standard books with really white paper that you realise they're usually a bit yellow, slightly textured. You might think that having whiter, smoother paper is an improvement. It's cleaner, brighter, more contrasty, but... it feels cheap. The paper is smooth and crisp, like the kind of paper you buy in reams to feed through your temperamental inkjet printer. It's smooth, without the grain and texture of standard book paper. It's also thinner: text from the reverse of the page, and even from the page after that, shows through, as you can see above.

Then there's the printing. Like the cover, there's something slightly off about it. Not only does the paper look like slick office paper, but the printing looks like it's been churned through an office photocopier. It looks like a photocopy of the original.

After showing examples, he continues:

The type is thicker, not because it's a different typeface or weight, but because it's printed poorly. Serifs are blotchy and there are more imperfections. It looks like a copy, rather than an original. Someone laboured over that typeface, to make it work for particular kinds of printing. It's effort that was wasted for this facsimile.

I suspect by this point you're either thinking “That's awful, what are publishers playing at!” or “What on Earth is the problem here? Who'd notice the difference?”

There is a difference. The newer version looks and feels inferior, cheaper, like a shoddy print-on-demand, self-published volume. And yet it costs the same and there's no way of knowing what you're getting.

There's the clue: that gratuitous “shoddy” before “print-on-demand, self-published.” Which, of course, is half-true for the book he purchased: going to the back of the book, he finds that it was produced by Lightning Source UK. Lightning Source is one of the largest PoD service bureaus, used by publishers—such as HarperCollins—to keep books in print when new print runs can't be justified. He calls it “bait-and-switch.”

When publishers appear to love their own books so little, when they're apparently happy to pass off a print-on-demand photocopy of

a book as a full-price volume, it's hard for the reader in turn to feel much love for these gradually disappearing objects.

The PoD version is not, of course, a “photocopy of a book” unless you're dead set on trashing the *only plausible way* of keeping backlist books in print. To my eye, the difference in print quality between the two was marginal at best. (Do note this: It is *perfectly* possible for a PoD book to use the same textured cream book stock as most printed hardcovers—that's the default for 6x9 books at Lulu—so if HarperCollins chose flat bright white instead, that was almost certainly their choice. I'd argue it was a mistake. Otherwise, yes, you can tell the difference between letterpress printing and laser printing, although it's a *lot* harder to distinguish PoD from offset lithography or other non-letterpress printing.)

If you read the post, do read the comments. Tony Burton gets it in one, explaining *why* the book was PoD and also why it wasn't cheaper—although also (properly) knocking HarperCollins for lack of quality control, if the book really was badly printed. Gyford does not respond well: he calls the book “shoddy” and that's all there is to it.

Scams or Not?

I tend to stress Lulu and CreateSpace when talking about on-demand self-publishing (as opposed to the kind where you pay for and get a huge heap o' books, then have to find ways to market & sell them). That's because they're truly service bureaus with no upfront costs, not even to set up your own online store. But they're not the only services out there. Not by a long shot. They're not even the only aboveboard, generally admirable outfits.

A few notes along the way—starting with one suggesting how confusing this can all get.

Book Country And Self-Publishing: Why the Hate?

Victoria Strauss asks that question [on November 23, 2011](#) at *Writer Beware®: The Blog*. The background: [Book Country](#), a Penguin subsidiary that calls itself “A Penguin Community” and that Strauss describes as “a digital slush pile/peer critique community,” announced that it was adding self-publishing services.

This prompted an explosion of negative commentary, including [criticism](#) from [self-published authors](#). But I've been following the Book Country story for some time—Book Country staff have been active in reaching out to the writing/blogging community—and a good deal of the commentary I've seen is either inaccurate, or ignores the forest for the trees.

There was one more link in the original but that page has since disappeared. Reading the two links, they're wholehearted attacks—and, frankly, I think they get *some* things right. The baseline Book Country charges do seem high (although the suggestion of one author that of course you're going to find somebody who will do it for you cheaper may be a bit optimistic for a newbie).

Here's the headlines Strauss culls from criticism of Book Country, followed by a few notes on some of them:

It's a scam!

Book Country is targeting vulnerable writers with deceptive hype!

Book Country is gouging authors by keeping 30% of their income!

Book Country is overpriced!

The fees don't even include editing or marketing!

It's not self-publishing, it's vanity publishing!

Some of her comments (and mine). Regarding "scam":

How, exactly? You may not think the service is a good idea; you may not like its terms. That doesn't make it a scam. A scam is an enterprise deliberately set up to deceive, cheat, and defraud victims. Using the word so loosely and inaccurately cheapens it, and makes it less meaningful when it's used to describe a *real* fraud.

Given the focus of *Writer Beware*, I can see why Strauss doesn't want to see "scam" overused. (If you want a rant about overly broad labels, consider "predatory publishers.") As it happens, between 2011 and now Book Country has modified its packages such that they start at \$0 for, in essence, something similar to what Lulu and CreateSpace offer for \$0 (including ISBN assignment).

Regarding "hype," she notes—as I do, 2.5 years later—that there's actually very little hype and none of the promises you see from some big-dollar services. Regarding 30%, she notes that most "middleman self-publishing services" charge some percentage, with Book Country being higher than Lulu, either higher or lower than CreateSpace (depending) and *much* lower than the AuthorSolutions companies. (I note that the Book Country percentage seems to have declined to 15%, or 0% if you buy a \$349 package.)

Re pricing: She's right to say that Book Country's packages are "at the lower end of [the] spectrum" for self-publishing services *that require packages*, but they were at the time higher than Lulu or CreateSpace, which don't.

Re editing and marketing:

Seriously? That's a criticism? The editing and marketing services sold by self-publishing companies—whether a la carte, or included in

publishing packages as a way of bumping up the price—are like liquor in restaurants: a major profit center, because they can be bought cheap and sold high. Like cocktails, they are frequently overpriced, undersized, and cause for serious buyer’s remorse once consumed. I frankly think that one of Book Country’s strengths is that it doesn’t lard its packages with this crap, or nickel-and-dime authors by shilling it separately.

Well...I suspect she’s right about a lot of those services (I’ve never used them). Book Country *does* now offer line-editing services (you might think of it as copyediting; it’s not full editing) and some forms of marketing promotion, but they’re still on the clean and modestly priced side.

Then there’s the “vanity publishing” point, and here I take issue with Strauss (I believe she’s since changed her tune):

This is absolutely correct. So what? Publishing through Lulu, CreateSpace, or any other middleman service that charges a fee is also vanity publishing—yet authors who use these services routinely identify themselves as self-published or (shudder) “indie,” and no one challenges them. Besides, the lines between self-publishing and vanity publishing have become so blurred over the past decade or so that I’m not sure this is a meaningful distinction any longer.

Once again, she’s lumping Lulu and CreateSpace, which *only* charge per-copy fees on sale of books (unless you choose optional services) with fee-charging middleman services. I think it’s simply false to call those two vanity publishing, and from what I can see of Book Country’s offerings it’s false for that outfit as well.

There’s more to the post and it may still be worth reading. There are also more than 60 comments, including ones that note that Lulu and CreateSpace *don’t* require fees and some that made more sense in 2011 than after Book Country offered its no-cost and very-low-cost packages. There’s also a *lot* of internecine warfare and hatred of People Who Aren’t Really Self-Publishers by Those Who Are. (By their standards, I’m not and never have been a *real* self-publisher. Actually, checking the current self-publishing page at *Writer Beware*, I see that it’s still striving to distinguish between what Lulu and CreateSpace do and true self-publishing and is reluctant to accept that Lulu and CreateSpace really *are* free; apparently, “you use your own ISBN” is now one key to being a *true* self-publisher. It’s a surprisingly biased and sometimes misleading discussion.)

Pearson Buys Author Solutions

Victoria Strauss again at *Writer Beware*, this time [on July 19, 2012](#). The story’s in the headline—and I’m now reminded that Author Solutions Inc. (ASI) is also iUniverse, Trafford and “the contractor for the self-pub

divisions of several major publishers.” Pearson is the parent company of Penguin Group and an enormous textbook publisher. The price was \$116 million—which struck Strauss as being a fairly low price, “given ASI’s dominant position in the self-publishing services market.”

Most ASI revenues come from authors, not from ASI’s share of the books they sell. The company guesses that an author will be worth \$5,000 to it over time—and it claims 90% satisfaction rate.

Strauss’ discussion has some interesting elements, especially if you were thinking of using any of the ASI operations.

Simon & Schuster Joins Forces With Author Solutions To Rip Off Writers

David Gaughran, who posted this [on November 28, 2012](#) at *Let’s Get Visible*, was one of those criticizing Book Country’s entry into self-publishing support, and this lengthy piece offers a sense of his mild-mannered approach.

The facts: Another big publisher started another self-publishing division and used Author Solutions Inc. (ASI) to run it. In the first two paragraphs Gaughran tosses out “disreputable player” with regard to ASI and “distasteful link-up” about the decision. He offers some numbers, and those are typical of numbers that convince me Author Solutions is a *terrible* way to do self-publishing:

Fiction packages start at \$1,999 and go up to \$14,999. If you have written a business book, prices are saucier again: \$2,999 to \$24,999.

While the upper end of the pricing spectrum is obviously shocking, some of you might think that \$1,999 isn’t too bad if you are getting a proper edit and a decent cover.

Not so fast.

The low-end package includes an “assessment” that’s not really editing; if you want editing, they’ll be happy to provide it at 3.5 cents a word (or, as Gaughran notes, \$2,800 for an 80,000 word novel). Then there are the royalties, and I find this pretty outrageous given that the author’s already paid thousands of dollars up front: Archway (the new division) keeps 50% of *net* proceeds (after Amazon or whoever’s taken their cut) for ebooks and 50% of the net *after* production costs for print books. Lulu’s 10% for ebooks and 20% for print books starts to sound awfully good by comparison—especially since they haven’t hit you up for \$1,999 to \$24,999 ahead of time.

There’s more about ASI’s other imprints, and it’s predictably strongly negative (and perhaps deservedly so).

More than 280 comments; I did not attempt to read them all. Interesting stuff—as long as you haven’t had the pleasure of doing business with ASI.

Archway's still around and explicitly touts its connection to Simon & Schuster (the logo in the top left corner says "Archway Publishing From Simon & Schuster"). One package is now slightly less than \$1,999, but only for children's books, and the business packages now range from \$2,199 to \$15,999. I guess that's progress.

Archway Publishing: Simon & Schuster Adds a Self-Publishing Division

If Gaughran's style is too combative for you, read Victoria Strauss' [November 28, 2012](#) post at *Writer Beware*. She begins:

Well, it's happened again. Another traditional publisher has added a pay-to-play "division."

She comments on the "services" and remarkable prices (apparently the lower bottom end for children's books was there all along, but not mentioned by Gaughran). Then there's the S&S connection: Archway makes it clear that ASI is running the show but also said this:

Additionally, [ASI] will alert Simon & Schuster to Archway Publishing titles that perform well in the market. Simon & Schuster is always on the lookout for fresh, new voices and they recognize a wealth of talent in Archway authors.

Strauss' take on that:

Um, yeah. But that's not actually what Archway Publishing—or any of the pay-to-play subsidiaries of traditional publishers—is all about. What it's about is the money—publishers' desire to cash in on the boom in self-publishing services, and capture a piece of a lucrative revenue stream.

She notes how much easier it's getting to DIY for little or no money—and that many service providers are far more cost effective than ASI and "have far better reputations."

It's not an exaggeration to say that, right now, ASI is the most hated name in the self-publishing services world.

Strauss says that ASI is "the *only* self-pub service provider about which we get regular complaints."

Strauss quotes [Publishers Weekly coverage](#) of the new unit and specifically this sentence:

S&S will refer authors who submit unsolicited manuscripts to the Archway program and will monitor the success of Archway titles.

She calls the first half of that sentence a "disturbing tidbit" and hoped it wasn't true or that S&S would rethink it: "Such referrals are seriously questionable, since authors who receive them are likely to give them more weight because they come from a respected publisher."

There is, of course, the oddity that Archway is run by ASI which is owned by what's now Penguin Random House—one of S&S' few major competitors.

Some 40 comments. I found one a bit bemusing because it said perfect binding is “more expensive than paperback”—although most paperbacks are, in fact, perfect bound. (Perhaps the commenter meant hardbound using perfect binding? Probably not, since the claim is that they got 1,000 copies of a book printed and bound for \$1,100.) At least one commenter points out that what ASI does is vanity publishing more than it is self-publishing.

Venerable Vanity Publisher Vantage Press Closes Its Doors

This has *nothing* to do with self-publishing or print on demand—and a lot to do with true vanity publishing, where you pay big bucks to be Published, resulting in a stack of books in your basement.

Victoria Strauss posted this [on January 16, 2013](#) at *Writer Beware*—and it's part news, part commentary. The news is that one of the oldest pure vanity presses (indeed, the one that's almost become the name of vanity publishers) shut down because it didn't have enough revenue.

Vantage Press began in 1949. Strauss recounts several ~~high~~ highlights of the firm: FTC orders, class action lawsuits. Strauss links to [an interesting law-review article](#) about Vantage and the class-action lawsuit (which, *thirteen years after it was filed* in 1977, yielded \$3.5 million for plaintiffs.) The article's author, writing in 1992, was a little too optimistic about the result of the lawsuit: he said it “may destroy the vanity publishing industry, or at least the illusions on which it has thrived for so long.” Or maybe not. The article does include an excellent discussion of what makes a publisher a *publisher* rather than just a book-producer, namely distribution and some level of marketing. Vantage Press didn't really distribute or market; thus, calling itself a publisher was fraudulent.

Apparently Vantage Press tried to rebrand itself as a self-publishing service—but still charged very high fees. Things went bad rather suddenly, it appears.

Author Solutions' Rep: People Complaining About Our Scammy 'Services' Are Engaged In 'Racketeering'

Tim Cushing posted this [on July 23, 2013](#) at *techdirt* and it offers further insight into Author Solutions Inc. (ASI). He summarizes ASI's background and pretty much nails it with three quotes (with links):

ASI's main business, by far, [is selling services \(most of them useless\) to authors](#). Selling books is almost an accidental byproduct.

[I]n 2011, ASI generated about 63% of its revenue from what it calls publishing and marketing services and 37% from distribution services.

ASI doesn't do much repeat business.

Since its launch, ASI has published 170,000 titles from 140,000 authors...

[Compare those numbers with Smashwords](#), a well-respected self-publishing service.

The site, which has published about 127,000 titles by 44,000 writers, is projected to double its revenues this year.

I could suggest that this is an apples-and-oranges comparison, since Smashwords only does ebooks (many of them much shorter than traditional book length), but it's still an interesting point. Cushing offers a strong statement as to why ASI doesn't do big repeat business, and I'll let you read that in the original. Significant in that discussion: the "average" ASI author spends about \$5,000...and sells around 150 books.

That's all background. The foreground: "Kevin" got an unsolicited sales pitch from one of ASI's business names and offered a fairly succinct email response:

Ugh, I didn't realize this was iUniverse under another name. I'll pass thanks. I've heard nothing but horror stories about how little authors get and how you people upsell for next to nothing in return.

He got email back from an ASI employee—email that begins:

Such horror stories are from websites that are being sued for racketeering, their [sic] essentially hiring people to write bad reviews about big companies.

Huh. According to Cushing, ASI's not suing anybody for "racketeering"—and certainly hasn't sued *Writer Beware* and similar sites. (There's more in the email response, some of it vaguely bizarre, such as the claim that ASI is "regulated by the FCC.")

I have never used ASI and never plan to. I have never purchased an ASI-"published" book. I have looked at one or two and was not generally impressed. I have no personal opinion on ASI's business practices—but I tend to regard *Writer Beware* as a generally reliable source.

By the Numbers

Considering some of the real and squishy statistics associated with self-publishing (and publishing in general).

Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics

It's an old title and actually a four-year-old piece, by Victoria Strauss [on May 4, 2010](#) at *Writer Beware®: The Blog*—but it's still worthwhile, even though I'll take a little poke at one piece of it. (Henceforth, I'm just going to call this excellent resource *Writer Beware*.) Actual numbers have, of course, changed since then; the situation may not have.

You may have read a recent article in PW called “Self-Published Titles Topped 764,000 in 2009 as Traditional Output Dipped,” about the amazing growth in “non-traditional” (a.k.a. print-on-demand-produced) books.

Or you may just have read about it, given how many tweets and blog mentions it received. If the latter, you may have wondered what such a gigantic surge in self-publishing portends for the commercial publishing industry (where output did indeed dip, though only by about half a percent)—or, if you’re one of those folks who believes that “traditional” publishing is or should be dead, you may have felt a surge of righteous vindication.

But as Strauss explains, while the numbers are real, they’re not very meaningful—because they include “micro-niche publishers,” specifically BiblioBazaar, Books LLC and Kessinger Publishing LLC. Those publishers do reprints as print-on-demand—or at least they “publish” lots and lots of reprints. The three companies combined accounted for more than 687,500 of those non-traditional titles, leaving around 77,000 for self-publishing and “micropress” publications.

Thus, CreateSpace produced 21,819 titles in 2009; Lulu 10,386. Xlibris did 10,161; AuthorHouse (another division of the same parent company) 9,445.

The discussion goes on to consider who’s buying all these books—”Or, put another way—how many of these books are being bought at all?” There’s some reason to believe that many of those hundreds of thousands of mostly public domain reprints *don’t exist* as actual printed books—they’ll only exist if and when somebody orders one.

The little nudge: Those numbers are for books *with ISBNs*—and, especially in 2009, I think it’s fair to assume that a lot of Lulu authors didn’t pay for ISBNs (now free). I know I didn’t. Lulu books sold only through Lulu simply don’t show up in Bowker figures.

Authors catch fire with self-published e-books

This Carol Memmott story [on February 9, 2011](#) at *USA Today* is about an unusual part of the numbers: a tiny handful of self-publishing ebook authors who’ve made it big, usually by selling ebooks at really low prices.

Amanda Hocking. 450,000 sales of nine titles in January 2011! H.P. Mallory, “another self-published paranormal novelist,” sold 70,000 copies in the last half of 2010—and got a Random House three-book contract out of it! J.A. Konrath has sold more than 100,000 self-published ebooks!

It’s all so wonderful. Of course, it’s all *very* far from the norm for self-publishing. Still, an interesting set of numbers. My primary conclusion: at least in the glory days of ereader adoption, lots of people will buy ebooks for \$0.99 without much coaxing.

Why Your Self-Publishing Service Probably Didn't Cheat You

Victoria Strauss at *Writer Beware* again, this time [on March 29, 2011](#).

I often hear from writers who are convinced that they're being cheated by their self-publishing services because they've been vigorously promoting their books, and yet their royalty checks are tiny. Often, these angry authors offer evidence: changing Amazon rankings, listings of their books with multiple online sellers, used copies for sale, friends' reports of purchases.

In essence, Strauss says, that's possible—but more likely it's “unrealistic expectations and assumptions.” Also known as spending “too much time at Joe Konrath's blog” or reading “one too many articles about Amanda Hocking.”

In reality, self-publishing is a tough way to go—and getting tougher every day as more and more writers rush into the field—and the successes that are currently being made much of in the media—while impressive—are not a representative sample.

Apparently, most Lulu books sell in the single digits (that wouldn't surprise me). Some AuthorSolutions books (xLibris, AuthorHouse, many others) *might* sell 100-200 copies, but with a 150-copy “average” it's likely that most of them sell in double-digits at best. Unless you're a great self-promoter, successful speaker who can peddle your books at appearances, or do an unusually good job of marketing, chances are your self-published book won't sell many copies.

Strauss goes on to note the extent to which Amazon sales rankings don't mean much of anything. There's a lot more, all of it worth reading if you decide to self-publish and are disappointed in the sales. You do know how easy it is to manipulate Amazon sales rankings, don't you? And that “used books” offered for sale *may not exist*—that is, the bookseller may not have the book at all.

The Cruel Paradox of Self-Publishing

Peter Osnos wrote this [on September 4, 2012](#) at *The Atlantic*—and the tease offers the key:

Digital and print-on-demand technology has made self-publishing much easier. But for every self-published work that gains traction, the overwhelming majority of books don't.

The hook for the story is the purchase by Pearson (here stated as a purchase by Penguin Group) of Author Solutions Inc., covered earlier in this roundup. But I think Osnos is simply wrong here:

For the first time, an established publisher, the second largest in the world, with about 40 imprints in the United States, is delivering its reputation and management resources to support the vast number of

people who want to write a book that, for a variety of reasons, does not make it to a traditional list.

Other traditional publishers have had self-publishing divisions for some time, and it's not at all clear that Penguin is really "delivering its reputation" to ASI. Nor is it at all clear that the acquisition would change the fact that most self-published books are "consigned to the margins of the marketplace."

I rather like this:

For most writers, publication gives the satisfaction of fulfilling an idea based either in a fictional tale, describing a hobby, or relating a family memoir, and seeing it come to life in book form. And yet there also is a dream among authors that a spark may ignite, and they will be found by readers scrolling websites and turned into one of those self-published writers who end up with lucrative contracts from traditional publishers, or at least very substantial followings of their own. The odds of that sort of success are long—better than a mega-million lottery, perhaps, or being discovered for movie stardom in a Hollywood drugstore—but it does happen.

PoD self-publishing (*not* the pricey packages ASI offers) works best, I think, for those described in the first sentence—and most of us have to know that the dream is a dream.

The comments are interesting, including this one from Rob Kroese:

So, um, what is the 'cruel paradox'? That publishing books is easy but selling them is hard? What else is new?

Hard to argue with that. (Another commenter says this a little differently: "If you had left the word 'Self' out of the headline and the subhead, it would still have been just as true.")

The eBook Path to Riches: Possibly Steeper Than Assumed

John Scalzi is unusually (for a successful writer) forthcoming about his adventures as a writer, including the financial side. [On January 16, 2013](#), he posted "The State of a Genre Title, 2013," giving the actual North American sales numbers for his (wonderful) novel *Redshirts* at the point that the trade paperback came out (and the publisher stopped printing hardcovers), basically seven months after the hardcover came out. Scalzi did well—maybe not James Patterson numbers, but still more than 79,000 copies (between ebook, audiobook and hardcover). He regards those as "healthy sales," as he should. The earlier post is quite interesting and revealing. As is typical with Scalzi's blog, there were a *lot* of (generally well-written, thoughtful) comments—more than 120. One of those comments included this statement: "Wow, if you would've published that book yourself, you would've made over \$300k from the ebook alone."

This post, [on January 23, 2013](#) at *Whatever*, offers Scalzi's careful explanation as to why that's probably (I'd say *almost certainly*) not the case. (He assumes that the \$300,000 comes from Scalzi's sale of 35,667 ebook copies at \$11.99 each: 70% of the resulting gross is just under \$300,000.)

His discussion is well worth reading *especially* if you believe you can get rich quick by self-publishing. It's in this section because he goes through the numbers fairly carefully. Then there's this:

5. Yes, but, what about [insert favorite eBook success story here], who made tons of money without all that, and so on, etc? This is where I remind people of the fact that exceptional cases are not a great place to argue from. I know that directly since I've been lucky enough to be an exceptional case, and I cringe every time someone points to me and says, more or less, "There's my argument." Exceptional cases are, by definition, rare and not representative.

It's important to note that Scalzi is *not* telling anybody else what they should or shouldn't do; he's explaining why, *for John Scalzi for this novel*, self-pub was not the way to go.

More than one hundred comments, probably worth reading.

New Publisher House and the State of Independence 2014 Report: Grain of Salt Required

Victoria Strauss [on October 4, 2013](#) at *Writer Beware*—and she's focusing on a "media technology firm" New Publisher House and a report that asserts that self-publishing is a \$52 billion industry.

That's astonishing. It's up to twice as much as traditional U.S. publishing (depending on whose figures you believe). Perhaps equally astonishing: according to the article Strauss quotes from, the report "looked at insights gathered from publishing executives, Amazon, Google and industry data." It also has these claims:

The report also revealed that the number of aspiring self-published authors that have completed manuscripts is more than 100x the number of actual published authors. In addition, according to the report, self-published titles are 8x the number of mainstream published new titles.

I love Strauss' immediate reaction:

Wow, I thought, interesting news! There's so little solid data on self-publishing—how great to have an authoritative industry report to shed more light on this exploding new market! So of course I tweeted it.

Except...\$52 billion seemed awfully big. "Amazon and Google aren't known for freely sharing numbers." So she read ~~the actual report~~—er, the Executive Summary for the actual report. Strauss notes that the summary doesn't offer any methodology or references, but it does

become pretty clear that it was written by New Publisher House's CEO. (That may be a tricky title: It's not clear that New Publisher House is much more than a website, nine months after all this happened. What is clear: The full report still isn't available.)

As Strauss dug for more information, she came up fairly empty, with the strong sense that this is a one-person report based on...well, it's not clear *what* it's based on. You can read the language in Strauss' post; it strikes me as somewhere between vague and vaporish.

The 8:1 claim would mean that self-publishers were producing more than two million new titles a year; once you remove the many public domain "reprints" (in scare quotes because it's not clear most of them ever actually existed as anything other than offerings), you've already seen some of the numbers—and at most they appear to roughly equal traditional publishing. If you take 100x the two million estimate, it's saying, basically, *everybody's written a book*, just most of them haven't published it yet. (That's not entirely fair: The Australian "CEO" is presumably looking at the entire world, not just the U.S. Still, these are some staggeringly big and improbable numbers.)

What I find most revealing: It would appear that nothing has happened with the report or with New Publisher House between late September 2013 and late June 2014. Maybe that crowdfunded report from this authoritative source will become "State of Independence 2015"?

Notes on Prices

The two companies that appear to offer pure PoD services (that is, production and sale of print and ebook books with *no* money up front, except possibly one proof copy) have continued to make their services more affordable and attractive.

I mostly use Lulu, partly because it has the widest range of offerings (although CreateSpace makes it faster and more likely to get books into Amazon, since it's part of Amazon). What I've seen there over the past year or two includes the following:

- Used to be, if you wanted an ISBN, you signed up for at least a minimal package (as little as \$39, I think, but CreateSpace always gave them away). No longer: now an ISBN is a no-cost option—although it does mean that Lulu becomes the publisher of record for your book (just as CreateSpace is for books with their ISBNs).
- Used to be, if you wanted distribution beyond Lulu itself, you paid extra—a very small sum for Amazon (I think), more for Ingram and the like. Now, broad distribution is also a no-cost option, although it requires that you have an ISBN and buy a proof copy and approve it.

- My recollection is that book prices for both 6" x 9" and 8.5" x 11" trade paperbacks at Lulu were \$4.50 plus \$0.02/page for black-and-white, or plus \$0.20/page for interior color. (Covers are always full color.) The pricing model now seems a bit more complex (the startup is now \$3.25 for 6x9, \$4.40 for 8.5x11, but that seems to include 100 pages for b&w) but here's what I've found—let's say for 100-page color books at both sizes or 250-page b&w books. Using the old model, the color book would run (if my memory is correct) \$24.50 in either size; the 250-page b&w book \$9.50. Here's the situation now:
 - The 250-page book is \$6.25 for 6" x 9" and \$8.90 for 8.5" x 11" using Lulu's 60lb. paper (cream or white for 6x9, white only for 8.5x11).
 - The 100-page full-color book is \$20.15 for 8.5" x 11"—but the 6" x 9" book is now \$14.00. That's not cheap, but it's a *whole* lot less than \$24.50.
 - If you're *really* on a budget, they now offer "value" books in a limited range of sizes, using 50lb. rather than 60lb. paper (the color books discussed above use 80lb. semigloss paper). 50lb. paper is what you may think of as 20lb. copier/printer paper—it's still better than mass-market paperbacks. That 250-page paperback? \$4.55 for 6" x 9" (\$2.45 for startup and the first 100 pages, \$0.014/page beyond that) and \$5.15 for 8.5" x 11" (\$2.75 for startup including 100 pages, \$0.016/page beyond that). For that matter, if you need color graphs and the like but not full-color photos, you could do that 100-page 6" x 9" color book for \$5.75, not \$24.50!

CreateSpace's equivalents? It's hard to calculate those; I can't find a direct author-cost calculator. At least for b&w 6" x 9" books, CreateSpace's cost per book *still* appears to be slightly lower than Lulu's, however—except that Lulu's value option appears to be cheaper than CreateSpace.

The good news? Prices are more competitive, color is becoming more plausible—and broad distribution doesn't incur upfront expense any more. It's getting more and more realistic to do print books even when there may only be one or two buyers.

Intersections

Access and Ethics 3

Unlike the previous three INTERSECTIONS essays, this one doesn't have a narrow focus. It looks at a range of commentaries having to do with open access and ethics over the past 18 months or so, loosely grouped into topics. At least one of those topics *does* overlap with previous essays: the always-interesting issues around "predatory" journals, although I'm

using the more plausible word “questionable” to cluster the commentaries.

You may notice that one publisher is largely missing from this discussion. That’s not because it hasn’t had any ethical issues related to open access—but because it deserves its own essay.

At the end of this piece are a couple of followups on two of those three essays (in the April and July 2014 *Cites & Insights* respectively): Why do I seem to have it in for Jeffrey Beall—and are there useful things to say about journals still trying to become ongoing concerns?

Questionable Journals

While I’m pretty sure nobody had analyzed Beall’s list before I took on the project, and while (in my opinion) too many people have uncritically praised the list and Beall’s work, there have been some interesting commentaries around “predatory” journals. A few of them:

Predatory journals include subscription access journals

So said Ross Mounce [on February 20, 2013](#) in his eponymous blog. The opening:

Just a quick post to say that I think Beall’s list of “predatory journals” should be expanded to include dubious subscription access journals.

I think it’s rather unfair on the open access movement to claim it’s just the open access business model that faces this kind of desperate exploitation.

He notes Elsevier’s half-dozen fake journals—but also “independent, low-quality fakes out there,” naming [one supposedly hybrid journal](#) that “recently published a ‘peer-reviewed’ (?) paper on the Sasquatch genome.” Mounce links to some “reviews” of the paper and says:

Are there any other really poor quality subscription access journals out there that should be listed on this list of journals/publishers to avoid?

Discuss.

There are no comments or discussion. Maybe because this particular situation is a little more peculiar.

On one hand, Beall *did* add the “publisher” to his list—I guess “hybrid” is close enough to OA to get past his “there are no predatory subscription publishers” rule.

On the other, the so-called journal and publisher don’t exist in any meaningful manner. The so-called journal site is a bad joke—and as of June 12, 2014, nearly 16 months after Mounce’s post, the “issues” consist of one issue which consists of one paper—the silly one in question. In

other words: there's no real journal, just an article with a "journal" built around it. I gave it an immediate "X"—there's no there there.

Which is, apparently, the real story: The authors couldn't find a reputable or even semi-reputable outlet for their article, so they did the next best thing: Established a "journal" consisting entirely of the article. But it's a subscription journal charging \$30 for the sole article, so the article isn't readily readable. (Actually, it's \$30 for the special issue ~~containing~~...er...*consisting of* the paper. The "issue" is emailed to suckers within 24 hours of paying for it.) Oh, and it's a "subscription journal" with *not one word* on the site about how anybody might subscribe to it. The site's sort of like that: one page apparently copied from some other journal site (author guidelines) and otherwise mostly blank space.

What we have here is not a predatory journal. It's a joke. On the other hand, Mounce's point is well taken.

Crowdsourcing a database of "predatory OA journals"

Mike Taylor [on December 6, 2012](#) at *Sauropod Vertebra Picture of the Week* (henceforth SVPoW), first praising Beall for his work (and noting an early slander about *PLOS One* from *Nature*, namely that it would be "relying on bulk, cheap publishing of lower quality papers." Not that some of us would consider *PLOS One's* APCs "cheap," but hey, we don't work for *Nature*.)

In any case, Taylor seems to have bought into Beall's idea that "predatory" publishers are a huge percentage of all OA—"for every PLOS, there is a Bentham Open"—but also recognizes that Beall's model won't work long-term. (Was *anyone* critical of Beall in 2012 or early 2013?)

So he discusses his notion—well, see the title. I won't try to excerpt it; you can read it and the comments yourself. I'm not convinced that his proposals would have worked well. In any case...well, the piece was published December 6, 2012. *DOAJ* is toughening its listing rules, but I sure don't see any such database. Nor am I certain such a database would be entirely desirable.

Will DOAJ pick up OASPA's spear?

Library Loon asked that question [on June 13, 2013](#) at *Gavia Libraria*. The Loon begins discussing CHORUS (see later) and SHARE (mentioned briefly in this essay) and assuming the government's "smart enough to realize that the PubMed Central system is *head and shoulders* above anything mentioned" in either one—and is also a battle-tested production system.

But mostly, the Loon's interested in the new criteria for inclusion in *DOAJ*. (The page she links to is gone now, but here's *DOAJ's* [current set of criteria](#). Unfortunately, I can't tell whether *DOAJ* weakened its original criteria—and I find one of the current criteria questionable: "Registration:

Free user registration online is acceptable.” I don’t believe that’s reasonable—I shouldn’t have to register to read an OA article.) In any case, back to the Loon’s comments...

She also links to a “DOAJ Seal of Approval for Open Access Journals” over and above inclusion criteria—and that page has also gone 404, but see below. DOAJ itself is in a state of flux: it will have a new online application form in the fall of 2014, at which point almost all publishers will need to reapply—but that form isn’t there yet. Meanwhile, the closest I could come is the [current DOAJ application form](#). That form includes some interesting points about DOAJ’s 2014 requirements:

- All content of a journal must be available immediately upon publication; “delayed OA” is not OA.
- A journal must publish at least five articles per year to stay in DOAJ—in other words, my “essentially empty journals” and some of the “few” journals wouldn’t qualify—and, of course, neither would the empty journals.
- A journal must have *either* a named editor *or* an editorial board with at least five members.

The application page also includes what I take to be a newer version of the missing “Seal” page, namely a note about qualifiers for that seal (which publishers can’t apply for: DOAJ will award it as appropriate). There are six requirements for the Seal, none of which have to do with most “questionable” issues: A journal must have an external archival arrangement, must use permanent identifiers, must provide article-level metadata to DOAJ and must embed CC licensing information in that metadata, must allow reuse consistent with either CC BY or CC BY-NC (*not* CC BY-ND), and must have a registered deposit policy.

The Loon’s thoughts are that OASPA has “repeatedly and conspicuously failed” to act as a watchdog on OA journal quality—and she sees hopeful signs that DOAJ might do better.

Will DOAJ have any better luck? Well, one hopeful sign worth noting is that OASPA is a trade organization funded by its membership, while DOAJ is grant- and library-funded; DOAJ can issue harsh judgments in a way OASPA reasonably finds difficult. DOAJ also has fewer axes to grind than the notably anti-open-access Jeffrey Beall; Beall is out to smear open access, DOAJ to continue legitimizing it. DOAJ’s recommendations also have a certain amount of consequence to them; quite a few library author-side fee funds insist that a journal be in DOAJ before they will pay out, and the Loon can easily imagine they will adopt the Seal instead with glad cries. The Seal is also a dead-simple heuristic of the sort tenure and promotion committees can be convinced to pay attention to.

Again, a year later I can't be sure that DOAJ's current heuristic is what the Loon saw. There's some reason to believe it's not. In any case, she finds the Seal criteria necessary but not sufficient, because the criteria don't focus on negative issues very much.

All in all, the Loon is not entirely satisfied, but she is encouraged. At minimum, these moves by DOAJ will encourage good practice among reputable open-access journals, which is no mean benefit all by itself. With luck, DOAJ will also help us all deal justly and appropriately with the cross.

Predators in the publishing jungle

This [July 17, 2013 piece](#) by Ian Woolley at *soapbox science* (hosted by Nature Publishing Group) offers a different and important perspective on Beall's activities and *actual* questionable journals—that of an infectious diseases physician active in Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders for us monolingual types) who cares about resource-poor parts of the globe:

Over the previous few years I had agreed to review for, and be on the editorial board of, a number of obscure journals in infectious diseases *pro bono*. Reviewing is almost always financially unrewarding work, but when the papers come from resource-poor parts of the globe and there is a lot of room for constructive advice it can feel useful; and after all, the whole system of peer review works on goodwill, doesn't it?

He got email from his boss that “felt a little like a warning” and linked to Beall's list—the warning being seeming agreement that tenure and promotion committees should “give extra scrutiny” to articles published in journals Beall doesn't like.

Woolley offers some comments about the tone of Beall's posts and the subjective nature of some of his criteria (and the rapid growth of the list, although the 225 publishers and 125 journals were *nothing* compared to the next iteration!):

So next time I get a request from a journal I don't recognize that is open-access I should go to Beall's list? There are a large number of supporting comments on the blog post that include, “This list is going to be very useful to me as a member of hiring committees, especially since the predators have started to imitate the names of serious journals.” But there are also criticisms raised: “Did you alone read and evaluate each one of these 370 journals? Is this an individual stand alone work?” And, “I do not believe totally on your list. There are some 370 journal, which you verified and inquired. Strange!!! I checked some of them, they are doing good providing good research without subscription charges and they are open access. Is your post more to

stop open access and help publishers who charge hefty amount even to read the research?” Beall replies, “perhaps we have different definitions of good research”.

He also notes the issue of cultural imperialism—whether intentional or not, Beall’s list is especially rich in journals that serve India, Nigeria and developing nations in general. He’s asking serious questions for serious scientists and doctors:

[W]hen is it worth donating time to a peer reviewed journal? When is it not worth the time? And when is it wrong because of the particular business model of a journal?

There’s more to an eminently worthwhile post. He started saving email invitations from journals (quite a few of them), including one from a “highly respectable journal” that published one of his group’s papers. The journal was

[O]ffering 1. “a Webshop Group deal to your institution save \$\$\$”, 2. Article offprints, 3. An eye catching colour poster of the journal in which your article was published, 4. An attractive colour poster celebrating your article, 5. The opportunity to create your own book. This publisher is not on Beall’s list and publishes some of the most respected journals in medicine.

I’m guessing the journal also isn’t OA. In any case, I think it’s clear that Woolley’s closing paragraph (last two sentences omitted) applies to *all* publishers, not just Gold OA publishers with APCs:

Predation involves the consumption or partial consumption of one creature by another. Predator-prey relationships demonstrate aspects of evolutionary change over sometimes short periods. Who is being consumed here and for what? We are the prey and the product is money, often public money filtered through grants and other sources.

Scopus, You’re Unravelling

This multipart post by Bruce White, currently dated [August 29, 2013](#) and appearing at *Library Out Loud*, deals with several issues (and raises a couple of its own: White seems to think that inclusion on Beall’s list is all the evidence you need to bar a journal from being indexed in Scopus), specifically with one fairly egregious journal. (Well, two, actually, but primarily the second.)

You need to read not only the post but also the comments, which largely consist of a dialog between White and Wim Meester, an Elsevier (Scopus) spokesperson. One thing that’s clear from Meester’s comments (and perhaps not unreasonable): while the selection process for Scopus is supposedly transparent, there isn’t an active policy for removing or discontinuing titles once approved. (That may be changing.)

The specific case apparently also involved the idiocy of a publisher threatening to sue a critic and temporarily replacing content with links to blog posts or other irrelevancies. Oh, as to the journal itself: while Beall continues to list it as a questionable Gold OA journal, it's *not* OA at all as far as I can tell. It does charge APCs, but every PDF in every issue I checked (admittedly not all of them) is marked as subscription access only, and clicking on any of them brings up a subscription form.

Another sure scam journal sign: worthless “endorsements”

The Library Loon, who posted this on [September 2, 2013](#) at *Gavia Libraria*, uses “scam journal” rather than “predatory” or my own “questionable.” The point she raises is a good one:

The last few scam journals and journal publishers the Loon has had cause to investigate shared a warning sign: meaningless “endorsements” or “indexing” from organizations that do not actually endorse journals, or whose indexes are too dilute to be meaningful. The scam publishers hope that would-be authors are impressed by random logos, or do not know anything about disciplinary indexes.

I've seen the logos (frequently scrolling) enough to recognize this. She notes three examples: Ulrich's is not an index at all (it's a list of journals) and makes no claims as to quality or legitimacy; CrossRef offers pay-for-service DOIs, not indexing; and, she says, “EBSCO, of late, has chosen quantity over quality in its disciplinary and general-use indexes.”

I'll add another I've seen a few times too often: *NewJour*, a 20-year-old site listing, well, new journals (and having a few criteria for inclusion). *NewJour* has never offered article indexing and has no plans to do so, so citing it as indexing a journal is questionable.

I've even seen LC and individual university logos appearing on journal sites. At this point, I'm almost inclined to say “the more logos, the more suspicious,” but that *might* overstate the case.

Strong editors

This [October 10, 2013](#) post at *Gavia Libraria* is not primarily by the Library Loon; instead, it's a comment from “The Digital Drake.” The Drake seems to be calling for a crowdsourced database of journal rating/reporting—but specifically one with a “strong editor (or editors)” to avoid axe grinding and the like.

You need an editor who maintains a forum where they, and contributors, can report on their experiences with scholarly journals, to inform people who want to know about good and bad forums to publish, review, edit, and read work in. “Good” and “bad” can be measured on a number of axes: how credible their review process is, how long their turnaround time is, how accommodating they are to open access and other reader concerns, and how reasonable or

predatory their pricing or contracts are. All of these concerns are of potential interest to the scholarly community.

You need an editor who has the time and the obsession to keep up the forum; an editor who has a good sense of forum moderation (and can decide, for instance, when to require attribution of a post to a known academic, and when anonymous posts should be allowed; and be able to detect and deal with trolls, defamers, shills, and sock-puppets). You need an editor well-enough connected into the world of scholarship to attract a critical mass of reviews and reports from scholars. And an editor whose sponsor, if any, will back them up when they get heat. (Because, as we've seen over the last couple of years, anyone who poses a serious and credible threat to questionable publishers' business is likely to get lawsuit threats, and possibly actual lawsuits.)

So far, so good—maybe. But at this point the Drake pretty much undermines his proposal by the second of his two examples of strong-editor publisher-watch projects. The first is reasonably good, *Writer Beware*® blogs, although it's gone off track a few times (usually finding its way back). But the second is Scholarly Open Access—and at this point I can't accept Beall as a paradigm or even a plausible example of what would be needed.

The Drake seems to think this is all doable—"a few thousand reports a year could cover the ground pretty well."

The Library Loon asks who would be willing to step up to such a task, ruling herself out as a candidate. I continue to question whether the task is feasible or necessarily desirable, but I'm frequently wrong.

Principles of Transparency

That's the shorter of two titles for this [December 20, 2013](#) report by Carl Straumsheim at *Inside Higher Ed*; the other (the one that's part of the URL) is "Publishing associations join forces to combat illegitimate open access journals." The piece discusses the [Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing](#), jointly issued by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), DOAJ, OASPA and the World Association of Medical Editors. I haven't separately discussed "Best Practice," but it's worth reading as a work in progress.

I think the article gives a little too much praise to Beall & Bohannon, but it's still an interesting brief piece. More interesting, in some ways, are the comments, including one from John Morgan that I'll only quote in part:

[R]ather than have as the "gate keepers" a few singled out individuals (chosen by whatever and usually unidentified standards) to serve on a board, why not have gate keeping at the time of submission of the essays (e.g., author just hold a verifiable doctorate, teaching at the university level, verified personal identity, etc.) and then post every

such submission. THEN, have the relevant scholarly community itself serve as the editors by posting substantive evaluative assessments of each submission on line! Each reviewer must be equally validated with the same criteria that submission authors most provide, thereby avoiding the quack and flippant response from an unqualified reviewer.

Now there's elitism in its clearest form: If you don't have a PhD and don't teach at the university level, *you have no business writing or reviewing scholarly work of any sort.*

Addressing Faculty Publishing Concerns with Open Access Journal Quality Indicators

[This article](#) by Sarah Beaubien and Max Eckard appears in the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communications* 2:2 (2014). It is perhaps worth noting that *JLSC* itself is a Gold OA journal with no APCs, published by Pacific University Library in Oregon.

It's an interesting article, well worth reading, although I must admit that I find the set of positive and negative criteria for OA journals to be more generous than I might be, and maybe that's OK. For example, "Any fees or charges for publishing in the journal are easily found on the journal web site and clearly explained" is a *positive* indicator—but it's fair to suggest that the *absence* of such clarity and easy finding is a major negative indicator. I'd certainly agree that the very first negative indicator—"Journal web site is difficult to locate or identify"—is an indicator, but I'd go a lot further: That's an absolute disqualifier. I note no negative indicators about quality of language on journal sites. Maybe this is a good thing: the authors are biasing *toward* acceptance of OA journals, which may be healthier than Beall's "one foul ball—and I call 'em—and you're out" approach.

Predatory Publishing

Some items on *true* predatory publishing—not necessarily OA-related and not necessarily journal-related, but appearing here anyway.

Desperate Publishers

That's the title Peter Coles offers [for this April 28, 2013 post](#) at *In the Dark*. Coles discusses a specific example—but also a more general problem, that of conference proceedings publications:

Before I go on I'll just digress a bit to mention a less well-known aspect of the Academic Publishing Racket, the *Conference Proceedings Volume*. For a long time you couldn't attend a conference in astrophysics without having to contribute an article to one of these books. Although usually produced on the cheap, using camera-ready

copy, and with minimal editorial oversight, these were sold to participants and (more lucratively) to university libraries at enormously inflated prices, often over £100 a go. It wasn't unusual for funding agencies to insist that a conference talk be followed up with a publication, so this racket flourished for a while.

Cole says the printed-proceedings "racket" has largely gone away, at least in astrophysics—but there are still special conference-proceedings editions of regular academic journals.

I've always thought this format was just as bad as putting them in a book, with the additional disadvantage that people might misinterpret the journal reference as meaning that the paper had been refereed. The paper I linked to above was not refereed, for instance. In any case they're a bit of a chore to write, and are just as likely to be of ephemeral interest, but if one is invited to give a talk one generally feels obliged to play ball and deliver the article requested.

Those of you who read the July 2014 *C&I* may remember that I flagged all-proceedings journals as N, that is, Not OA Peer-Reviewed—and I may or may not have made it clear that I ignored conference-proceedings issues when counting the number of published articles in a journal, as it was my understanding—as Cole says here—that such articles were unlikely to be peer reviewed.

But that's all to some extent a digression. In this case, a colleague of Coles at Sussex did a conference talk and was asked to write up the talk for a special journal issue.

He did his talk and wrote up the obligatory article for the special journal edition of the conference proceedings. But times have changed. When he tried to submit his article via the web upload facility he was directed to a screen asking whether his work was funded by the *Science and Technology Facilities Council*. When he answered "yes" he was told he was obliged to pay \$3000 for the privilege of publishing his paper in Gold Open Access mode....

The colleague went to Cole to ask whether the appropriate school would pay the \$3,000:

I nearly had a seizure. It's bad enough getting landed with a hefty bill for writing an article as a favour to the conference organizers, but it's even worse than that. The publisher was *deliberately and disgracefully misleading the author about the [RCUK policy on open access](#) in order to take money from them*. There is no requirement for researchers to pay for Gold OA in such a case. Sharp practice is too polite a phrase to describe the actions of this publisher. And of course nobody mentioned the \$3000 fee when he signed up to give a talk at the conference.

Here we have a different kind of predatory publisher, one specifically trying to profit by, if Cole is correct, misrepresenting the truth.

Unfortunately, I think this sort of questionable business practice is bound to proliferate as publishers seek to maximize their revenue from Gold Open Access before the academic community rumbles the scam and cuts them out all together. So let this post be a warning. Do not trust academic publishers who try to charge you up front. Check the rules very carefully before committing yourself or, preferably, declining to publish with them. There are sharks out there and they're after your funding.

So what scammy Gold OA “publisher” (or in this case “hybrid” publisher) is involved in this case? [Need you ask?](#) I don't think of this publisher as an OA publisher at all, although it's clearly only too happy to take its extremely high profits any way it can. I think of it as a publisher so special that I have more items flagged with its name than I do with “oa-ethics” in general, which is why it's generally *not* discussed in this roundup.

Predatory publishers: a real problem

So says Mike Taylor in [this April 29, 2013 article](#) at SVPoW—and, like Cole, Taylor really is talking about predatory activity by publishers. He leads off with an intro about Beall's list, but that's not his real theme. His case in point is a lawsuit brought against Delhi University for selling course packs to students that use excerpts from textbooks.

This lawsuit despite the facts that (A) Indian copyright law has an exception for educational exercise; (B) the course packs don't affect publisher revenue because there is no way Indian students can afford the books; and (C) Thirty-three of the authors specifically named as meriting protection in the publishers' petition have publicly stated that they want no part in the suit, telling them “it is unfortunate that you would choose to alienate teachers and students who are indeed your main readers”...

The truly horrifying part of this is that the case was filed by Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press and Taylor & Francis—three publishers who we've been used to thinking of as reputable, and who want researchers to think of them as trusted partners.

Technically this doesn't belong in this roundup at all: while all three publishers are subscription journal publishers, this is about their textbook arms. Still, the point's well taken. Taylor goes on to say:

Dear publishers: if you don't want to be called enemies of science, stop being enemies of science.

Sounds pretty radical to me.

It's not about predators, it's about journal quality

So says Bonnie Swoger [on May 24, 2013](#) at *Information Culture*—and while she mentions Beall's list, she shows some skepticism about it.

She notes the apparent problem: There are too many journals out there for a researcher to be familiar with all the good ones. Swoger notes some attempts to deal with this, such as journal metrics.

Looking at Beall's list of “the worst journals of all,” Swoger notes:

But the term “predatory” can be misleading. It implies evil intent, and Beall ascribes evil intent to publishers who charge high author processing fees, do little work with regards to peer review or copyediting, and make lots of money. In this case, the authors are the prey and are being duped into forking over large amounts of money to be published. I worry that Beall is making a stronger connection than necessary between predatory practices and open access.

She looks at “another, more traditional scenario”:

Let's say a publisher wants to make money. The publisher asks authors to submit their content for free, and even makes the authors sign away all rights to the work prior to publication. The publisher may provide some services like coordinating peer review and type setting a final document (although the quality of these can vary widely). They then turn around and sell that publication for exorbitant fees, making healthy (or more than healthy) profits. In this case, I might argue that authors AND subscribers are the “prey” as the publisher exploits the system of academic tenure and promotion to make a profit.

For that matter, a hefty percentage of these publishers *also* ask for money from the authors.

Swoger notes the hefty annual increases in subscription journal costs and says they make her feel like prey.

It can be very hard to determine if a journal is predatory or not: that term is dependent on the publishers motives. Sometimes journals just aren't very good, but they are trying. Sometimes journal quality is great, but they are squeezing the life out of the organizations that subscribe to their journals (just ask most any librarian what has happened to their book budget).

Swoger offers some suggestions for judging a journal as a possible outlet—and suggests asking “your local librarian” about those issues.

CHORUS

That stands for [ClearingHouse for the Open Research of the United States](#), a “public-private partnership” to, supposedly, implement Federal requirements for public access to publicly funded research—by providing research articles from publisher websites.

It's been around for about a year now, more or less, and it's interesting to note that, as of June 13, 2014, at least, the signatories to CHORUS include loads of publishers, a group of publisher-related associations...and an interesting number of libraries and library associations, given the presumed virtues of CHORUS. Namely, zero. To me, that's a good sign that there's something a little off-key in this CHORUS (can't resist). Some other mostly early comments follow.

A CHORUS of boos: publishers offer their "solution" to public access
Michael Eisen on June 4, 2013 at *it is NOT junk*; Eisen had earlier published a fairly extensive extract from early CHORUS proposals. At this point (no official proposal in June 2013 but a set of principles), Eisen said:

I've seen enough to know that this would be a terrible, terrible idea—one I hope government agencies don't buy in to.

He notes that AAP, which is fairly clearly behind CHORUS, has been "the most vocal opponent of public access policies."

Putting the AAP in charge of implementing public access policies is thus the logical equivalent of passing a bill mandating background checks for firearms purchasing and putting the NRA in charge of developing and operating the database. They would have no interest in making the system any more than minimally functional. Indeed, given that the AAP clearly thinks that public access policies are bad for their businesses, they would have a strong incentive to make their implementation of a public access policy as difficult to use and as functionless as possible in order to drive down usage and make the policies appear to be a failure.

Eisen offers more commentary as to why CHORUS' supposed cost savings aren't especially meaningful and that it's hard to take publisher-based claims of savings at face value, given consistent history.

The comments are interesting, especially the major presence of one of SKitchen's chefs, who indirectly makes the point that CHORUS is all about maintaining publisher revenues and control (and directly accuses Eisen of wanting to put publishers out of business).

CHORUS:hoping for re-enclosure

The Library Loon offered this discussion [on June 5, 2013](#) at *Gavia Libraria*, as an addition to Eisen's "scathing takedown" (which the Loon links to). She does have one point to add:

Just this: control of the infrastructure on which open-access copies reside is important for more than immediate financial reasons, and it's what the publishers are playing for here. Infrastructure that publishers control is vastly easier to re-enclose.

What she deems more likely is “soft technological protection measures” (quoting [Eschenfelder and Benton](#)).

“Soft TPM” in their parlance means deliberately heightening user annoyance, such as penny-ante irritants as disabling printing and downloading, using lousy search algorithms, turning away web search engines, and so on. The aim, of course, is making the open-access materials a poorer substitute for what libraries buy.

She considers this a stalling tactic, now that RWA went nowhere—with the ultimate intent of undoing the NIH Public Access Policy and the OSTP memo.

She also doesn’t think CHORUS is likely to succeed in this aim. A year later, the Loon’s skepticism looks entirely sensible.

I am highly skeptical of the CHORUS system proposed by scientific publishers as an end run around PubMed Central

Another Eisen heard from, this one Jonathan Eisen writing on (or updated on) [June 27, 2013](#) at *The Tree of Life*.

This is a case where the best I can do is quote one paragraph and point you back to the post, which includes lots’o’links to earlier posts.

This appears to be an attempt to kill databases like Pubmed Central which is where such freely available publications now are archived. I am very skeptical of the claims made by publishers that papers that are supposed to be freely available will in fact be made freely available on their own websites. Why you may ask am I skeptical of this? I suggest you read my prior posts on how Nature Publishing Group continuously failed to fulfill their promises to make genome papers freely available on their website.

After the set of links is this:

We need to make sure such papers are freely available permanently and the only way to do this is via making them available outside of the publishers own sites. Pubmed Central seems to be a good solution for this. I would be happy to hear other possible solutions—but leaving “free” papers under the control of the publishers is a bad idea.

Some interesting comments as well.

How To Provide Open Access?

That’s the on-page title for Ry Rivard’s [June 5, 2013](#) article at *Inside Higher Ed*, although the webpage title is “Publishers, universities both prep open access plans.” It’s a plausible news-style story with quotations from various sources. I found portions of it a bit confusing—and, as usual, publishers’ claims that it’s a way to save money for the Federal Government seem implausible. There’s this (from Fred Dylla of American Institute of Physics):

He said the goal is to prevent what he called the duplication of a central repository like PubMed. It also keeps eyeballs on publishers' websites.

This so-called duplication and attendant Huge Costs have been a broken record that publishers have been playing ever since NIH began implementing its policies (fortunately, with Congressional approval). Michael Eisen flatly says CHORUS is “a fairly cynical attempt on the part of the publishers to undermine PubMed Central and the government's efforts to expand it.” (There's also some discussion of possible university/library plans in this area.)

The first comment talks about “the well-known problems with the PubMed Central operation, and the vagaries of government funding...” I'll admit to being ignorant of those “well-known problems,” but find that the source of the comment—Sanford Gray Thatcher—offers a form of insight.

CHORUS: It's actually spelled C-A-B-A-L

So says Jason Hoyt in [this June 5, 2013](#) post at *Enjoy the Disruption*—also pointing to Michael Eisen's post as a good writeup.

Hoyt flatly calls CHORUS “another attempt by subscription publishers to defeat Open Access,” notes that the plan calls for shutting down PubMed Central, points out that the system would (presumably) *increase* costs to libraries—and wonders why there hasn't been a breakdown of expected operating costs and charges, which could be compared to the actual costs of PubMed Central.

But that's just the financial cost; more concerning is the cost of giving control of Open Access content to organizations whose business model is counter to the principles of OA.

Are these APIs truly open? What happens if I decide to build an aggregator with this content that is supposed to be Open Access? Will I be restricted or charged for high volume access, because publishers are now losing eyeballs as researchers go to my aggregator search engine? Do we really want publishers in charge of the key to the only source of all embargoed Open Access content? How gullible do they think the Obama Administration is?

SKitch's David Wojick is there once again to point out how this can only be a good thing.

At this point, I went back to the CHORUS site—just over a year later—looking for any financial comments or other clarity. I found none. I did find claims that CHORUS is a public-private partnership...but its signatories are 100% publishers, publisher associations and private agencies serving publishers, as far as I can see. It's as much a partnership as PRISM was (and

of course the DC Principles folks—yes, they're still around—are one of the signatories).

Scientific Publishers Offer Solution to White House's Public Access Mandate

I'm including [this June 4, 2013](#) news item, by Jocelyn Kaiser at *Science*, both because it's only fair to provide space to pro-CHORUS voices (AAAS, publisher of *Science*, was an early signatory to CHORUS) but also because it's a fairly well done report, starting with the lede:

A group of scientific publishers today announced a plan for allowing the public to read taxpayer-funded research papers for free by linking to journals' own websites. The publishers say that this will eliminate the need for federal agencies to archive the papers themselves to comply with a new government directive. Details are sketchy, however, and it's not yet clear whether the plan will accomplish everything that the government wants from agencies.

A year later, that last sentence is still good.

Chapter, Verse, and CHORUS: A first pass critique

Cameron Neylon weighed in [on June 7, 2012](#) at *Science in the Open*—and it's a long, careful critique, one I won't quote in detail. He notes that the CHORUS group is “substantially the same group that put together the Research Works Act”—enough reason to view CHORUS with skepticism.

I will admit to being sceptical from the beginning but the more I think about this, the more it seems that either there is nothing there at all – just a restatement of already announced initiatives – or alternately the publishers involved are setting themselves up for a potentially hugely expensive failure.

That's near the beginning of a long discussion. He points out problems for government agencies, problems for publishers, likely problems for users and more. Best read in the original.

I was traveling when...

Most of Peter Suber's direct writing on OA issues now appears in the form of posts on Google+, which at least in some cases means there's no real title, as on [this June 7, 2013](#) discussion. Suber also points to Eisen and notes that, well, what the “title” says: he was on the road at the time.

He focuses on one particular deficiency in CHORUS:

I'll elaborate just one here. CHORUS isn't the publishers' first choice. It's their proposal for satisfying the February 2013 green OA mandate from the Obama White House <<http://goo.gl/K85OZ>>. I'm sure that the publishers who drafted CHORUS would prefer to see the Obama directive simply disappear. But now they're forced to play defense and

propose their own method for implementing it. The Obama directive requires green OA to the bulk of federally-funded research, so the publisher proposal must do the same. But instead of proposing green OA in repositories independent of publishers, it proposes publisher-hosted green OA. Moreover, many of the publishers who would host the green OA have a track record of lobbying fiercely and deceptively against green OA mandates like the one they are now offering to implement. They must sense the conflict of interest, and anticipate that others will sense it as well. Hence, CHORUS sweetens the deal by proposing OA to the published versions of articles, rather than to the final versions of the authors' peer-reviewed manuscripts. This is not a new idea, and has been a favorite proposal of publishers for years.

There's more, but his overall comment is solid: "if the agencies covered by this directive adopt the CHORUS proposal, then I predict that the resulting OA will be flaky, selective, temporary, and late."

Better than joining the CHORUS

Kevin Smith [on June 10, 2013](#) at *Scholarly Communications @ Duke*—and he's looking not only at CHORUS but also at the university/library alternative: SHARE (for Shared Access Research Ecosystem). I'm not covering [SHARE](#) in any detail, and it's also still a work in progress, but that hyperlink (or searching the spelled-out name) will get you to ARL's set of documents on what's happening.

Smith's take on CHORUS is interesting:

I think CHORUS is being touted, at least in what I have read, by comparing it to a straw man. Its principle virtue seems to be that it would not cost the government as much as setting up lots of government-run repositories, clones of PubMed Central. But it is not clear that that option is being seriously suggested by anyone. Certainly many of us encouraged the agencies to look at the benefits of PMC for inspiration and not sacrifice those benefits in their own plans, but that does not mean that each agency must "reinvent the wheel," no matter how successful that wheel has been. So the principle virtue of CHORUS seems to be that it does not do what no one is suggesting be done.

But that's only the beginning; as usual, Smith's analysis is extensive and well worth reading. As to SHARE itself, it doesn't belong in a discussion of access ethics and it has a whole separate set of issues, most of them ones I'm not qualified to discuss. One interesting early discussion appeared [on June 12, 2013](#) at *LJ* (written by Meredith Schwartz).

Will CHORUS become an operating entity? Will it be so great that it convinces the government to shut down PubMed Central? Would this be a good thing? I'm pretty sure the answer to at least two of those three is "no," but I'm no expert.

Questionable Policies

A catchall heading for a range of issues.

Policies, publishers, and plagiarism prosecution

Stuart Shieber posted this [on May 15, 2013](#) at *The Occasional Pamphlet*. The lede:

One of the services that journal publishers claim to provide on behalf of authors is legal support in the case that their work has been plagiarized, and they sometimes cite this as one of the reasons that they require a transfer of rights for publication of articles.

I've always been a bit bemused by that claim because I just don't remember a lot of examples of publishers providing such legal support—or, for that matter, of plagiarism of scholarly articles being pursued as a legal issue.

Shieber offers an example of the issue itself: a Harvard author with an article accepted by a journal—in this case a society-related journal published by Wiley—attached the standard Harvard OA addendum to Wiley's publication agreement. Wiley rejected the addendum:

Unfortunately, we are unable to accept this addendum, as it conflicts with the rights of the copyright holder (in this case, the [*society on whose behalf Wiley publishes the journal*]). They guarantee the same rights that our copyright forms guarantee, but Harvard University, unlike Wiley, offers no support if your article is plagiarized or otherwise reused illegally.

As Shieber notes, Harvard's OA policy allows for waivers (which happen in a tiny percentage of cases), but he found Wiley's argumentation “transparently disingenuous.”

First, the society is *not* the copyright holder: the publication agreement provides an exclusive license, not an actual transfer of copyright.

And anyway, whether it's an exclusive license or a wholesale transfer of copyright, that doesn't conflict with the addendum by virtue of the plain words in the addendum: “Notwithstanding any terms in the Publication Agreement to the contrary, Author and Publisher agree as follows:...”

Second, the claim in the final sentence is nonsense on two grounds. Wiley *has no way of knowing* that Harvard won't provide support for illegal use. More important, nothing in the Harvard addendum prevents a publisher from providing such support.

More fundamentally, however, there's a basic premise that underlies this talk of publishers requiring exclusive rights in order to weed out and prosecute plagiarism, namely, *that publishers would not be able to*

do so if they didn't acquire exhaustive exclusive rights. But there's no legal basis to such a premise that I can imagine.

Plagiarism per se is not a rights matter at all, but a violation of the professional conduct expected of scholars. Pursuing plagiarists is a matter of calling their behavior out for what it is, with the concomitant professional opprobrium and dishonor that such behavior deserves. Publishers should feel free to help with that social process; they don't need any rights to do so.

There's more to the post, worth reading as usual, including this comment:

(As an aside, the offer to prosecute plagiarists and rights violators isn't much of a benefit in practice. How many instances of publishers going after plagiarists on legal grounds based on the publisher's holding of rights have there ever been? [As Jake said](#), "Isn't it pretty to think so?")

Shieber sees it as fairly simple. Wiley allows green OA—but with a twelve-month embargo (known in my vocabulary as “not OA”). The publisher is indirectly forcing a waiver of Harvard's policies.

Of course, saying “we won't accept the addendum because we want to limit people reading your article” doesn't sound nearly as good as “otherwise we couldn't go after plagiarists.”

Sounds right to me.

Want a Faster Review? Pay for It

This is unusual: I'm citing a Jeffrey Beall post at *Scholarly Open Access*, this one dated [November 7, 2013](#). It's about a publisher that offers authors expedited review and processing for a price. In this particular case, the price is fairly hefty. The normal APC is \$1,365 (which I regard as high), but you can also pay \$2,600 for eight-week turnaround, \$2,800 for four weeks or an even \$3,000 for two-week turnaround.

What are the ethical aspects of paying more in order to get an article published faster? If an author pays a higher amount, does this increase a paper's likelihood of being accepted?

The publisher *was* on Beall's list but was removed earlier in 2013. He knows of one other publisher (on his list) that offers expedited review for a fee—albeit a \$90 fee, not a \$1,235-\$1,635 fee!

Here's where it gets strange:

It seems that having financial transactions between scholarly authors and scholarly publishers is not a good idea. This is a weakness of the gold open-access model.

Once again we have Beall of the Narrow Worldview. If there is an issue here, it's *not* a Gold OA issue, since most Gold OA journals—at least those in *DOAJ*—don't charge APCs, but it is an issue for thousands of subscription journals, since so many of them do charge author-side fees of various sorts.

Whether an expedited processing fee is ethical is an entirely different issue. There are certainly more examples of journals and publishers with such offers. I agree that they're questionable—but the ethical question has nothing to do with Gold OA. If you read the article, read the comments: they're particularly interesting.

What's An Editorial Board To Do?

Paula Kaufman asks that question on [November 11, 2013](#) on the *IPRH Blog* of the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities.

Kaufman had been on the editorial board of *Journal of Library Administration* (JLA) for more than 15 years. In the spring of 2013, she—and *all* other editorial board members—resigned because of a dispute with Taylor & Francis over license terms. She tells the story here.

Kaufman calls JLA “a peer-reviewed middle tier bimonthly scholarly journal” (note the strikingly honest use of “middle tier”) that had, in practice, relied heavily on invited articles rather than traditionally refereed articles.

Without recounting the whole story, it's fair to note that it came down to T&F “allowing” CC licenses—but only if authors paid a \$2,995 fee. For a middle-tier journal. In library and information science.

This obviously wasn't a viable option for our authors or much different from its then-current open access option, of which to our knowledge no JLA author had ever taken advantage.

Read the whole story. Including the unsurprising comment that reaction to the mass resignation, while “swift and supportive,” was also short-lived.

Technically, this wasn't about OA; it was about the related issue of licenses. It may be worth noting that *Library Leadership & Management*, the journal of ALA's Library Leadership and Management Association, is now online only and a no-fee Gold OA journal.

Attacking academic values

This one—by Kevin Smith [on March 27, 2014](#) at *Scholarly Communications @ Duke*—may be a bit odd as compared to most of this roundup, but it's worth reading and paying attention to.

The basic story: the week this was written, Duke faculty members started asking about formal waivers of Duke's faculty OA policy, because Nature Publishing Group was telling them such waivers must be obtained before articles could be published.

It is not clear why NPG suddenly requires these waivers after publishing many articles in the past three years by Duke authors, while the policy was in force and without waivers.

Smith also thinks the waivers are essentially meaningless because Duke's implementation automatically allows for the six-month embargo (before even the *author's final manuscript* can be seen) NPG wants. "The demand seems to be an effort to punish authors at institutions that adopt open access policies."

Smith's good at spotting silver linings: he sees the chance to remind faculty of the OA policy, to explain why NPG's demand is irrelevant—and to remind authors they can still voluntarily archive their work. "I suspect that this move by NPG will actually increase the self-archiving of *Nature* articles in our repository."

But there's more: Smith sees NPG's efforts as directly attacking academic freedom and faculty governance. "NPG thinks it has the right to tell faculties what policies are good for them and which are not, and to punish those who disagree." He also finds much to dislike in NPG's license, and you really should read that section. (NPG requires a waiver of moral rights, which is *very* unusual but also not much of an issue in the U.S., where moral rights aren't part of copyright.)

Smith believes NPG is "actively attacking core academic values." He explains why with his usual clarity. The comments—including at least one from an NPG representative—are also worth reading. (*Of course* the NPG person says "NPG is supportive of open access"—on NPG's terms.)

ACSGate: Pandora opens the American Chemical Society's box and her University gets cut off

Peter Murray-Rust posted this [on April 2, 2014](#) at his eponymous blog. Briefly, the story is that a researcher was scanning a Wellcome Trust spreadsheet of OA publications it had paid for and was following links—and when the researcher followed one link, they suddenly got a message saying that there was "suspected systematic downloading" and access to ACS publications was cut off—for the IP address, apparently the whole university.

The post discusses "spider traps" and notes that what this researcher was doing—following links related to OA—should never have caused such an event. PMR's key comment:

I think we are close to the tipping point where publishers have no value except to their shareholders and a sick, broken, vision of what academia is about.

If you read the post, also read the comments, including (of course) one from ACS' assistant director of OA programs.

OASPA and Springer

The Library Loon posted this [on April 8, 2014](#) at *Gavia Libraria*—and it has to do with fallout from [the SciGen “escapade,”](#) the 120+ “conference proceedings” that were computer-generated nonsense but nonetheless good enough to make it into published conference proceedings from Springer and IEEE—until a French scientist pointed out that the papers were nonsense and the publishers withdrew them. (SCIgen is the software that creates such papers. If you’re wondering what such a paper might look like, read [“Positivity Methods in Non-Standard Lie Theory”](#) by the sterling team of W. Crawford, S. Abram, D. Salo and B. Fister, noting that one of those “co-authors” may be as unaware of the paper’s existence as some “co-authors” of some of the 120+ conference papers were.)

The Loon links to a *Nature* article (the “escapade” link above) that offers some detail, including a useful note from the researcher who uncovered these papers:

Labbé emphasizes that the nonsense computer science papers all appeared in subscription offerings. In his view, there is little evidence that open-access publishers—which charge fees to publish manuscripts—necessarily have less stringent peer review than subscription publishers.

OK, sigh, so *Nature* gets it wrong as usual: most OA publishers do *not* charge fees to publish manuscripts—but that’s pretty much standard (mal)practice these days.

Back to the Loon...she notes that OASPA at least temporarily sanctioned Springer (a member) (see next subsection).

The Loon has been harsh about OASPA in the past, so let that color her statement that this was exactly what OASPA should have done. The last thing that organization needs is any more hints that it is in hock to its dues sources, much less that it only picks on outfits too small to matter. Springer will clean house (on this particular conference, at least) and all will be well for the time being.

One concern does arise, though: reporting and action. Was Springer sanctioned simply because it’s too big to evade the academic trade press when this sort of thing happens? If it hadn’t become such a big attention-getting stink, would OASPA have done anything, or just three-little-monkeyed the whole affair?

OASPA’s history of action is not comforting. Dove Medical Press wasn’t kicked out despite clear signs of disreputability until the horrific Amy Bishop tragedy made national news, for example. It seems clear so far that OASPA doesn’t take action until external circumstances force its hand. That’s not what the Loon looks for in a proper watchdog.

Not a lot to add here, but here's additional background:

Statement regarding Springer's membership of OASPA being placed Under Review

This appeared under Claire Redhead's name [on April 7, 2014](#) on OASPA's site. Selections:

Springer, one of the affected publishers, which published 16 of these articles, is a member of OASPA. Given that the publication of these articles is evidence of a systematic problem with editorial processes, we have placed Springer's membership of OASPA 'under review', pending a thorough response and description of the steps that are being taken to strengthen the necessary processes.

As of this writing (June 17, 2014), the Springer Science+Business Media link on OASPA's list of members continues to say "under review" and the linked page (a page describing the publisher and offering links to its site) includes a link to the statement noted here. (Full disclosure: For the "control group" analysis in JOURNALS, "JOURNALS" AND WANNABES: INVESTIGATING THE LIST, [C&I 14.7](#), I *did not* include SpringerOpen—that is, the OA portion of Springer—since it has been "under review" during the period of the study.)

Do I Hate Jeffrey Beall?

That one's easy: Of course not. I've never met the man. I've been insulted by him, which puts me in good company, but then I've been insulted by Stevan Harnad as well, and I don't hate him.

My major problems with Beall are that he seems to be regarded as some sort of Authority—and he seems remarkably incurious about any aspect of scholarly journal publishing outside his Gotchas List. Which, if he and his lists weren't so frequently quoted as being significant, might not matter: I know nothing about neurobiology, but that's of no consequence because I don't claim to know anything about it.

I've cited some examples of Beall's oddly limited worldview in previous pieces—Beall's ignorance and apparent disbelief regarding subscription journals charging author-side charges (which thousands do); his absurd notion that the serials crisis is over thanks to Big Deals (and his preference for a silly set of citations over actual, you know, facts)—but here's one more, from Richard Poynder's [July 11, 2012 interview](#) at *Open and Shut?*

RP: Presumably this implies publishers that charge a fee to publish scholarly papers (Not all gold OA journals do charge a fee)?

JB: By definition, gold open-access publishers levy an article processing charge (APC).

That's a little like saying that by definition all fruit is apples: It's absurd. It doesn't help that Poynder did not see fit to question Beall's absolutely false statement (read the interview: Poynder takes some pretty good swings of his own against Gold OA, reinforcing his Harnadian status in the OA galaxy).

Beall's strong on his Humpty Dumpty status: words mean whatever he says they mean. Thus, later in the same interview:

RP: Is there such a thing as a subscription-based predatory publisher?

JB: No, not according to my definition of predatory publisher.

A bit later, Beall says he's not anti-OA, but apparently he's changed his mind about that—or at least about (all?) open access advocates. But we've already covered that ground.

The problems with Beall are that he's taken much too seriously and that he's come to view all of OA from his own little corner.

Thinking about Startup Journals

Are there ways to determine whether you should consider helping a “journal” or wannabe to become a real ongoing journal, either by contributing an article or by joining the editorial board?

This is a subtler question than the one I attempted to help answer in the concluding section of [JOURNALS, “JOURNALS” AND WANNABES: INVESTIGATING THE LIST](#), which is more along the lines of “Should I submit an article to Journal X?” The question I'm considering here arises for about 60% of journals from Beall's lists, about one-third of journals from OASPA member, more than one-third of librarianship OA journals and relatively few mathematics journals: Those that don't yet have enough content to be considered going concerns.

Assumptions

I'm going to make some background assumptions:

- With more than 28,000 journals (maybe more than 35,000 depending on who's counting), including more than 9,000 OA journals, peer-reviewed publishing doesn't suffer from an overall shortage of journals. Therefore, in the absence of other indicators, the default answer should probably be “No.”
- More and more journals with narrower and narrower niches tend to encourage even thinner salami-slicing articles, as the least publishable unit of scholarship gets smaller and smaller. This wastes everybody's time except, I suppose, for tenure committees that rely on quantitative measures. It specifically wastes the time of readers

and scholars, but also referees and editors. Again, this argues for “No” as a default answer.

- On the other hand, some countries and regions may be poorly served by the existing journal universe, especially in some fields. That argues for saying “Yes” in some cases.
- On the other hand, there are probably *many* subject areas where there are not enough no-fee Gold OA journals, ones that can encourage developing-nation scholars and others who lack lavish funding to make their scholarship public or, potentially, undermine overpriced subscription and high-fee OA journals. That also argues for saying “Yes” in some cases.
- If you’re a scholar (including independent scholars and researchers and those without PhDs), you have a pretty good notion what your field is.

Those are the assumptions. Where do they take us?

Age

I think the rest of the comments below only apply to journals that are less than two full years old (or three full years at the outside), with the exception of young journals that are publishing five to 19 articles per year.

If a journal’s been around for a while and still falls into the empty or essentially-empty category, and generally if it’s been around for a while and still has few articles, it seems to me the community has made its decision: This is not a needed or beneficial new journal. The rest of these notes apply to *young* journals that haven’t quite made it yet.

The Publisher’s Mission and the Journal’s Mission and Scope

These statements should help you determine whether this is a *needed* or at least *beneficial* new journal. The statements need to be evaluated differently for no-fee Gold OA journals than for APC-based Gold OA and subscription journals, I believe. (The usual caveat: I am not a serials librarian. I am not a librarian, for that matter.)

Let’s take some examples from recent *NewJour* entries. I would have taken the latest bunch, but they’re all from big traditional publishers or publishers *owned* by fairly big traditional groups. So I looked in mid-June 2014 to find some diversity.

Consider, for example, [Rare Diseases and Orphan Drugs](#), established in 2014, with two issues published to date.

Rare Diseases and Orphan Drugs Journal (RARE Journal) is a new international open access, online, peer-reviewed journal published three times per year, with no publishing fees.

The mission of RARE Journal is to provide an advanced forum on important aspects of public health, health policy and clinical research in ways that will improve health care and outcomes for persons suffering from rare diseases, as well as globally increase rare diseases experience sharing.

RARE Journal serves the international rare diseases community by publishing high-quality articles from epidemiology, public health, health economics, social sciences, ethics and law, with a special accent on rare diseases best practices guidelines, rare diseases research recommendations, and rare diseases epidemiological reports.

I don't know whether existing journals adequately cover rare diseases and orphan drugs, but there's at least a reasonable chance they don't. More significantly in this case, the very first sentence and paragraph makes it clear that this is a no-fee Gold OA journal. The journal site also clearly identifies a sponsoring publisher and grant funding, in both cases with links.

Those are generally good signs. Combined with the fact that the journal has nine articles two-thirds of the way through its first year, it's at least a plausible candidate.

Now consider another Gold OA journal launched in 2014: [Development Studies Research](#). It's from Taylor & Francis and, once you look far enough, you see that it charges \$1,200 APC. That sets the bar higher—pretty nearly as high as for a new subscription journal. Here's the aims & scope:

Development Studies Research (DSR) is a multidisciplinary journal providing an interdisciplinary platform for original, critical research. The journal aims to broaden understandings of current development studies research, open up new areas of debate, reflect on and advance development theory, identify problems of policy and practice, and present potential solutions and recommendations to the development community, private sector and conservationists.

So far, this 2014 journal has three articles. Those help to give a sense of what “development” actually means. Oh, and over to the side is a little ad for a “free to read special issue” of *another* T&F journal on Development Studies, this one the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, which has been around for quite some time (it's in Volume 35). A quick look at some issues of that journal make it clear that it's international in scope. So why the new journal?

Well, one reason's clear: CRDS is a “hybrid” journal, with an open-access fee of (gulp!) \$2,950. So the new journal is *less* overpriced for OA than the old one—although \$1,200 would still be prohibitive, I suspect, for many authors in developing (there's that word again) nations.

Are there no alternatives? Searching journals (not articles) at DOAJ for “development” yields 345 journals; of those, 246 (71%) do *not* have fees. Slicing down by subject, one good possibility is “Economic growth, development, planning,” which includes 30 journals, of which 25 do not have fees. Some have been publishing OA content for more than a decade. The other most likely subject is “Environmental sciences” with 33 OA journals, 18 of them (55%) with no charges. (There doesn’t seem to be any overlap between the two sets of journals.)

Does this mean the new T&F journal isn’t needed? I can’t say that. I can say that it’s less obvious that it *does* serve a new purpose other than to extract fairly high APCs.

More caveats: I am not an expert in this field. I *am* aware that one of the publishers now merged into T&F certainly had instances of salami-slicing in the librarianship field, but for all I know the new T&F high-APC Gold OA journal could be filling an absolutely essential niche that no other journal (or no more reasonably-priced or free Gold OA journal) can do as well.

Also added to *NewJour* in June 2014 is the [Asia Pacific Journal of Environment Ecology and Sustainable Development](#). It’s published by an association. It’s from Nepal. Here’s the Focus and Scope statement:

Asia Pacific Journal of Environment Ecology and Sustainable Development [APJEESD] is an annual e-journal of Association of Tropical Rain Forest Conservation and Education, Nepal (ATRFCE). The journal publishes articles once every year in the month of January. The journal covers the area of Environmental Sciences, Ecology, Pollution, Biodiversity conservation, Sustainable development and various allied disciplines in the categories of research articles, review articles, book reviews and short communications. The main purpose of this publication is to promote awareness on Biodiversity conservation and to improve the scientific dearth in the field of Environmental Science research. Now a days the majority of Journals accept huge processing fee from the authors to publish their articles. But the researchers especially in the third world countries cannot afford the same. The publication of articles in Asia Pacific Journal of Environment Ecology and Sustainable Development is full of free; our prime intention is the dissemination of quality research publications in Open Access (OA) without financial or technological barriers.

The assertion of need is clear. There’s only been one issue so far, with nine regular articles. Unfortunately, that single issue raises an *enormous* red flag: every single one of the ten articles in the single 2013 volume has ES Abhilash as the sole, the corresponding or a secondary author (and in two of the cases the editor-in-chief is also an author). Perhaps it’s not too surprising that the 2014 issue, due in January, has yet to appear.

Here's another one: [Perspectives in Science](#) from Elsevier. What's that you say? Elsevier already publishes more than 2,000 journals? What makes this one worthwhile? Well, it's OA, it's "for publishing unique collections of research papers," and "your content will be delivered in a distinct issue." What's the APC? Elsevier is curiously reluctant to say. It mentions "bulk article processing fees" but nowhere in its author guidelines or on the journal page could I find an actual figure. Here's the closest I could get:

Publication fees are negotiated on a case-by-case basis and authors typically do not have to pay anything. Open Access is financed through a bulk article processing fee paid by the guest editor for the issue.

The only issue is a special collection on reporting enzymology data. It sounds as though all issues are special issues with guest editors. Is this journal serving an unfilled need at a reasonable price? It's impossible to say, especially since no price is available. I'll admit to being dubious.

The other extreme for APC-charging Gold OA journals are the publisher mission statements that make it fairly clear that the publisher is out to become A Leading Figure in OA Publishing, and is tossing out as many new journals as seems feasible in an effort to achieve that goal. I've also seen lists of journals by topic, where it's hard not to believe that the publisher is either indulging the whims of scholars who want to be Editor-in-Chief of a new journal or just tossing spaghetti against the wall to see what sticks. These are not good reasons for you to help the "journal" become a going concern: They are excellent reasons to stay away.

Does this help? I'm not sure

I chose four examples from journals added to *NewJour* in June 2014. Personally, I would conclude that one of the four might be worth helping toward full journal status. Is this an easy process to carry out and does it yield worthwhile? I'm not sure.

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Masthead

Cites & Insights: Crawford at Large, Volume 14, Number 8, Whole # 176, ISSN 1534-0937, a journal of libraries, policy, technology and media, is written and produced irregularly by Walt Crawford.

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