

Kristóf Nyíri

The Merits of Self-Publishing

In his famous 1938 paper “The Age of the World Picture” Heidegger wrote: “The scholar disappears and is replaced by the researcher engaged in research programs. These, and not the cultivation of scholarship, are what places his work at the cutting edge. The researcher no longer needs a library at home. He is, moreover, constantly on the move. He negotiates at conferences and collects information at congresses. He commits himself to publishers’ commissions. It is publishers who now determine which books need to be written.”¹ Let us skip the sentence “The researcher no longer needs a library at home”, so obviously true today, but, at the time Heidegger pronounced it, an uncanny premonition rather than a statement of fact or a prediction of technological developments actually foreseen. I want to reflect on the assertion that it is publishers who (and I add: today much more effectively than in the 1930s) determine what should be written. Of course the typical publication today is not the book but the paper, even in the humanities or more broadly the social sciences, the fields I have before my mind’s eye in the present note. So how does the process of publishing a scholarly paper look like?

First, the author (for simplicity’s sake, let us speak of single authors) gets an idea (or does not get an idea, about this more soon), decides to write a paper, and produces a list of possible journals he or she might send the contemplated manuscript to. This list is important, because most journals have very detailed requirements as to the structure, referencing style, etc. of the papers they publish (and here begins the determining role of publishers). On the other hand the list is

¹ Martin Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes” (1938), here quoted from the translation by Julian Young and Kenneth Hayes in Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 64.

not really important, since most journals adhere to some variation of the APA style.²

The author now sits down to actually write the paper. Whatever he has to say, he must be careful not to frustrate possible referees. Indeed it is wise to include in the references works by any probable referees the author can think of. It does not matter if those works are actually irrelevant, the (author, year) reference system does not require a genuine context. Even so, the scheme will not work flawlessly, the referees, if at all benign, will voice wishes. The journal's editor will have a suggestion, too, namely that the author should refer to some papers that have been published in that very journal – think of the impact factor. Revisions ensue. Eventually, if all goes well, the paper gets published. But very few people will read it; as a matter of statistical fact, in most cases nobody will read it.

So why do authors go to all this trouble? The reason, of course, is the “publish or perish” pressure.³ Whenever they have some spare hours – which seldom happens, since most of their time is spent on writing grant applications⁴ while collapsing under the usual teaching burdens – they will be worrying not about how to add new insights to their research field, but about how to add new items to their list of publications. The safest way here is to participate in conferences. Your university pays for it. You travel, you contribute, if not to scholarship, but at least to the climate catastrophe. Still, your paper – practically the same paper given again and again, given to the same audience again and again – will be published.

² Cf. my https://www.academia.edu/41951747/HOW_TO_CITE_The_Glory_and_Misery_of_the_author_year_Reference_Style. An overwhelmingly convincing, indeed staggering, analysis of what the catastrophic implications of the (author, year) reference style amount to is a paper by Nicholas C. Burbules, “The Changing Functions of Citation: From Knowledge Networking to Academic Cash-value”, *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, vol. 51, no. 6 (2015), pp. 716–726. I have exploited this paper by Burbules in my “How to Cite” piece quite essentially.

³ Cf. http://www.hunfi.hu/nyiri/selected_fb_entries.pdf, entry of April 5, 2020.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, entry of April 9, 2020.

Is there an alternative? Certainly there is, but not within the framework of the present university system. At the moment, the option to bypass editors, referees, publishers and the rest, that is the possibility to practice online self-publishing, to choose the format and layout one finds adequate, not to care about copyright issues, to face genuine post-publication reader judgement instead of phony pre-publication refereeing, is open only to outsiders – e.g. retired professionals like me, past the job-hunting and grant-seeking age, or say to amateurs safely embedded in a different discipline. However when the present pandemic is over, when the smoke lifts, a revolution – a conservative revolution – will be inevitable. Our way of life will have to change. The university system will have to change. And last but not least, our publishing patterns might – indeed they should – very fundamentally change.

Dunabogdány, May 24, 2020

#conservatismwhenthesmokelifts #amikorafüstfelszál