Moving from Dissertation to Book: Embargoes and Revisions

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At the AWSS-sponsored roundtable on "Women Navigating Academia: Networking" at the 2013 ASEEES meeting in Boston, an audience member asked an extremely important question about whether it is advisable to post one's defended dissertation on a personal or academic-sponsored website. On the positive side, the dissertation would then be easily available to prospective employees and publishing houses, as well as other scholars. A lively conversation ensued, prompting me to put together the following thoughts on the issue.

First let me say that I myself believe in the broad sharing of academic information and have published a book chapter in a peer-reviewed volume published by the non-commercial Open Book Publishers.¹ Open Book is run by scholars who champion open access to research. I had an excellent experience and would not hesitate to publish with them again.

That said, having a dissertation freely available on the worldwide web poses challenges for junior scholars in the humanities and some of the social sciences who wish to publish their dissertations with an academic press. This is especially true for those who have secured or hope to secure a tenure-track position in a college or university. The problem became particularly acute when Proquest Digital Dissertations allowed free access to entire dissertations on academic library databases. Although Proquest has once again started to charge for access to full dissertations (which limits the number of readers), more and more universities are posting dissertations defended at their institutions online.

Academic presses are becoming increasingly reluctant to publish freely available dissertations, which have not subsequently been substantially revised. In its guidelines to authors Indiana University Press notes that dissertations "are rarely publishable without substantial revisions." Harvard University Press flatly states that "we do not publish . . . unrevised dissertations," while Oxford University Press notes that "if you hope to publish your dissertation as a book, do not agree to its inclusion in an institutional or commercial online repository."²

We need to keep in mind that book sales have been declining dramatically in recent years. The falloff is a result of rising costs of book production, university libraries' elimination of the automatic purchasing of academic books and reliance instead on costly digital databases, the


competition from digital sources, the closure of bookstores, and readers' reluctance to pay exorbitant prices.

The problem for first-time authors in securing contracts for revised dissertations has become acute enough that the American Historical Association has recommended that "graduate programs and university libraries ... adopt a policy that allows the embargoing of completed history PhD dissertations in digital form for as many as six years."\(^3\) That six-year moratorium allows a brand new tenure-track assistant professor the requisite time to revise the dissertation, secure a contract from an academic publisher, do final revisions, and have the finished manuscript proceed to the "in-press" stage, which means that the book is guaranteed to appear in print.

The AHA's thinking is based on the current general standards for tenure and promotion at research institutions and the challenges that junior faculty experience in meeting these expectations when they also have time-consuming teaching and service responsibilities. A similar worry extends to authors in full-time nonacademic jobs, who nonetheless would like to have a published monograph out of their dissertations. Until tenure and promotion standards and academic publishing change to reflect the new digital world, first-time authors need to protect themselves and their work.

Although not all first-time authors will be able to place a six-year embargo on their dissertations, they should consider leaving dissertations off of their personal websites and taking advantage of the embargoes that ProQuest Digital Dissertations and many universities do allow. Those embargoes delay open access for anywhere from several months to a few years.\(^4\)

Also keep in mind that publishers are seeking manuscripts that will appeal to as broad an audience as possible. McGill-Queen's University Press advises authors to undertake extensive revisions of the dissertation in order to take the work to an entirely "different level in the book manuscript," so as to make "it new."\(^5\) Thus, revising a dissertation involves more than tinkering with language or inserting a few new nuggets of information.

Extending the period covered by the dissertation and or adding new themes are a couple of ways of reaching a broader audience. The final product should be a work that demonstrates maturity of thought and analysis that comes with more reading, more research, and rereading of primary sources to uncover things you missed the first time round. Think of rewriting as providing your audience with the best road map you can so that they are able to navigate your prose and reasoning with ease. Readers need to be told not only the substance of your ideas but also their importance. Subject every sentence to intense scrutiny so that it conveys its meaning succinctly


and in an engaging fashion. Vary sentence structure, avoid repetition of key words, and integrate quotations into the narrative by splitting up block quotations and inserting more analysis.

Even in the case of polished chapters, which have appeared in print elsewhere (no more than a third of the dissertation should be published in other venues), it is best to make the material appear fresh and interesting to your previous readers. Think about writing as having a musicality and rhythm that is more like a lyrical sonata than a loud, monotonous, repetitive march. Picking up a piece of academic writing or fiction that you have admired and dissecting its language will help immeasurably in your own rewriting. Honing your analysis and language will pay huge dividends in the long run for both you and your readers.