INTRODUCTION

Matt Wedel’s post *The most important essay on scholarly publication this week* (Wedel 2014) was one of several posts on this blog that have alluded to Clay Shirky’s now-classic article *How We Will Read* (Shirky 2012). Here is the key passage that we keep coming back to:

“Publishing is not evolving. Publishing is going away. Because the word “publishing” means a cadre of professionals who are taking on the incredible difficulty and complexity and expense of making something public. That’s not a job anymore. That’s a button. There’s a button that says “publish,” and when you press it, it’s done.

In ye olden times of 1997, it was difficult and expensive to make things public, and it was easy and cheap to keep things private. Privacy was the default setting. We had a class of people called publishers because it took special professional skill to make words and images visible to the public. Now it doesn’t take professional skills. It doesn’t take any skills. It takes a WordPress install.”

And of course as blogs such as *Sauropod Vertebra Picture of the Week* (SV-POW!, where the first version of this article was posted) demonstrate, publishing doesn’t even need a WordPress install — you can just use the free online service.

THE “PUBLISH” PUN

This passage has made a lot of people very excited; and a lot other people very unhappy and even angry. There are several reasons for the widely differing responses, but I think one of the important ones is a pun on the word “publish”.

When Shirky uses the word, he is talking about making something public, available to the world. Which after all is its actual meaning.

But when academics use the word “publish” they usually mean something quite different — they mean the whole process that a research paper goes through between submission and a PDF appearing in a stable location (and in some cases, copies being printed). That process involves many other aspects besides actual publishing — something that in fact Shirky goes straight on to acknowledge:
“The question isn’t what happens to publishing — the entire category has been evacuated. The question is, what are the parent professions needed around writing? Publishing isn’t one of them. Editing, we need, desperately. Fact-checking, we need. For some kinds of long-form texts, we need designers.”

And this is dead on target. Many writers need editors[*], to varying degrees. Fact-checking could be equated with peer-review, which we pretty much all agree is still very important. Most academic publishers do a certain amount of design (although I suspect that in the great majority of cases this is 99% automatic, and probably involves human judgement only in respect of where to position the illustrations).

But due to the historical accident that it used to be difficult and costly to make and distribute copies, all those other tasks — relatively inexpensive ones, back in the days when distribution was the expensive thing — have become bundled with the actual publishing. With hilarious consequences, as they say. That’s “hilarious” in the sense of “tragic, and breathtakingly frustrating”.

SACRIFICING COPYRIGHT FOR PEER-REVIEW

That’s why we’re stuck in an idiot world where, when we need someone to peer-review our manuscript, we usually trade away our copyright in exchange (and not even to the people who provide the expert review). If you stop and think about that for a moment, it makes absolutely no sense. When I recently wrote a book about Doctor Who (Taylor 2013a), I had several people proofread it, but I didn’t hand over copyright to any of them. My ability to distribute copies was not hobbled by having had independent eyes look it over. There is no reason why it should have, and there is no reason why our ability to distribute copies of our academic works should be limited, either.

What we need is the ability to pay a reasonable fee for the services we need — peer-review, layout design, reference linking — and have the work published freely.

Well, would you look at that? Looks like I just invented Gold Open Access.

Is publishing just a button? Yes. Making things public is now trivial to do, and in fact much of what so-called publishers like Elsevier and OUP now do is labouring to prevent things from being public (Taylor 2013b). But we do need other things apart from actual publishing — things that publishers have historically provided, for reasons that used to make sense but no longer do. Exactly what those things are, and how extensive and important they are, is a discussion for another day, but they do exist.

NOTE

[*] The whole issue of academic publishing is further confused by another pun, this one on the word “editor”. When Shirky refers to editors, he means people who sharpen up an author’s prose — cutting passages, changing word choices, etc. Academic editors very rarely do that, and would be resented if they did. In our world, an “editor” is usually the nominally independent third party who solicits and evaluates peer-reviews, and makes the accept/reject decision. Do we need editors, in this academic sense? I am inclined to think we do.

REFERENCES


