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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: Moirologists, Authority and the Academy

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From the University Presses
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cousins. Some librarians have even told me, when I mentioned that some anti-commercial press policies were badly hurting university presses, that the latter were unfortunate collateral damage.

But if university and commercial presses are cousins with occasional common interests, libraries and university presses are siblings, birthed by the same institution and living under the same collective roof. We may resent each other at times, be jealous at other times, but at the end of the day we're family, and the family can only prosper if we develop and cultivate cooperation.

This can be done both by finding new projects to work on together and by evolving our institutional relationships. To start with the latter, I can offer a specific example. My successor as director at **Temple University Press** will also serve as the library's (which really means the university's) scholarly communication officer, in which capacity she/he will work with both library and press staff on an everyday basis. This is to some extent modeled on the **Purdue University** library-press model and will include moving the press into the library as a way of a) getting it back on campus after a four-year exile to a three-miles distant satellite building and b) giving the library and press staffs real opportunities to get to know each other and start thinking together. Other presses also live in actual libraries — Indiana, Arizona, and Georgia come to mind — and I hope they will periodically report, as they did at the 2013 **AAUP** meeting, on their successes and their difficulties.

At this writing, something like twenty presses report to libraries. It would make sense for them to meet at **ARL** or **ALA** or **AAUP** conferences to compare their experiences and perhaps to foster cross-institutional partnerships to deal with some of the larger issues that simply can't be resolved by individual institutions alone. These include tackling the problem of the massive outflow of university money to commercial presses (mostly, but not always for STM materials); the outflow of student funds to commercial textbook publishers; the free rider problem, whereby universities and colleges without presses allow those that have them to bear

by far the lion's share of the costs; and the honest consideration of whether all scholarship needs to be open access or whether alternative solutions might offer OA where it's most needed while revenue-producing items — more affordably priced to be sure — would help build a sustainable system. Indeed, as **Temple Dean of the Libraries Joe Lucia** has suggested, we need to work better together to define what constitutes success in scholarly communication. There is so much to do, and we can do it so much better if really engage each other so that we take full advantage of our complementary skills.

With that I bid you all adieu. Many thanks to those who have read any of the pieces I've contributed in the past couple of years. If some of them have sparked a thought or two, then the effort has been worth it. I hope to find new ways to contribute to the scholarly communications ecosystem in the months and years ahead, so you may from time to time hear from me again in this space. Meanwhile, my thanks to **Katina Strauch** for the opportunity to share my thoughts and to **Tom Gilson** and **Toni Nix** for putting up with my challenges to the concept of a fixed deadline. You folks are great! 🌱

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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — "Moirologists, Authority, and the Academy"

Column Editor: **Michael P. Pelikan** (Penn State) <mp10@psu.edu>

I heard someone say recently, "The textbook industry is in trouble. You can't swing a dead cat without hitting someone who thinks they can write the next textbook replacement..."

Huh? Who would want to swing a dead cat? How would such a person be regarded in a professional setting? And where does the expression "you can't swing a dead cat without hitting (this or that)," come from, anyway?

The World Wide Web seems to be, well, not-fully-informative on this last question. *Yahoo Answers* labels as "Best Answer" a meandering set of data points touching variously upon "the hit TV show Cheers," the idea that the gestured form of the expression is performed "by circling of one hand in the air like a lassoing action," and the assertion that "the term 'dead cat' is an expression from the mide-70s... not referring to our kitty friends

though." Finally, the *Yahoo Answers* entry links to an etymology site according to which, "...there is no trace of this phrase, [sic] before the last twenty years."

Hmmm. If I remember my **Tom Sawyer** correctly, it was **Johnny Miller** who, for the privilege of helping **Tom** whitewash the fence, "...bought in with a dead rat and a string to swing it with..."

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Not too great a leap from rat to cat.

And since rats, mice, and other mammals are already called upon to assist in advancing the cause of Science, let's use rats for the possibly distasteful job before us, that is, to tease out and separate conflicting truisms about the veracity of content accessible on or through the World Wide Web designed to serve an academic or educational mission.

Professional or paid mourners, according to Wikipedia, are also called *Moirologists*. Wikipedia cites <http://wordsmith.org/words/moirologist.html>. That's reassuring, because my *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, is silent on the matter, my *Websters Unabridged* is not at my present location, and my kid sister, the Classicist, got the *OED* when we cleared out Dad's study — she had more room than anyone else, as well as the most plausible requirement for it.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* does cover the word *authority*, however. For the purposes of this column, we're going to use the third definition, "the power to influence others based on recognized knowledge or expertise > an authoritative person, book, or other source."

I mention moirologists because they were, quoting Wikipedia, "...compensated to lament or deliver a eulogy." I can't claim to fall under the demographic group this represents and am glad of it. Truthfully, I couldn't, in good conscience, accept compensation for lamenting something I truly lament. Nor, for that matter, would I comfortably lament something simply because I thought my job called for it.

At any event, I think it's a little early to call in the moirologists for the textbook-publishing industry wake. There's nothing going on in the world that should cause the textbook-publishing industry to choke to death on its last meal.

There *may* be, however, enough going on to give them a little heartburn...

But let's not be negative.

Permit me instead to celebrate a couple of things. These, I think, are Good Things, and, in my opinion, worthy of celebration. If anyone wishes to regard them as a threat to a way of life, let them call in the moirologists. It's not my job.

The first thing I'll mention is **Khan Academy**, which, if you haven't visited yet, is found at <https://www.khanacademy.org>. Have you ever helped a kid out with homework only to run into the realization that some of your own K-12-acquired content could use a little dusting off? I first learned of the **Khan Academy** in conversation with another parent who was helping a kid out with math homework. According to their "about" page, they are, "...a not-for-profit with the goal of changing

education for the better by providing a free world-class education for anyone anywhere."

According to the Wikipedia article on **Khan Academy**, in 2004 **Salman Khan**, a graduate of MIT and **Harvard Business School**, began tutoring his cousin in mathematics using Yahoo's Doodle Notepad. The article continues, "When other relatives and friends sought similar help, he decided it would be more practical to distribute the tutorials on YouTube. Their popularity there and the testimonials of appreciative students prompted **Khan** to quit his job in finance as a hedge fund analyst...in 2009, and focus on the tutorials (then released under the moniker '**Khan Academy**') full time." By 2010, **Khan Academy** had transformed into a

501 (c) (3) organization and stopped accepting advertising revenue via YouTube and is now supported by donations including what Wikipedia terms, "...significant backing from the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** and **Google**."

From pre-college Math, the organization has branched out into additional subject areas including Science (Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, Cosmology and Astronomy), Computer Science (Python Programming), Economics and Finance (Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Finance and Capital Markets, Entrepreneurship), and the Humanities (World History, Art History, American Civics). They also partner with content from the **Museum of Modern Art** (MoMA, NY, NY), the **J. Paul Getty Museum**, the **Stanford School of Medicine**, and others.

This is already content of astonishingly high quality, and getting better.

Much good can also be said for our next exemplar, the CK-12 Foundation.

Again, according to Wikipedia, CK-12 is "...a California-based non-profit organization...established in 2007 by **Neeru Khosla** and **Murugan Pal** to support K-12 science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education.

They began though employing a Web-based platform called the "FlexBook," but have gone on to broaden their focus to content delivery across multiple modes of delivery.

Do this if you haven't already (and perhaps you have: maybe I'm the last person to discover this stuff — it wouldn't be the first time...): go to **Amazon**, then the Kindle book store, then do a search on the term "CK-12." As of this writing, that search gets me 64 results, 52 of which are Kindle books published by the **CK-12 Foundation**, and 12 of which represent **Amazon's** search system trying to be over-helpful.

The point is this: you can buy all 52 of those books published by the **CK-12 Foundation**, 41 of which have customer ratings of four stars or greater, for a grand-total-outlay of \$0.00.

Just on the first page of results we find *Basic Physics – Second Edition, Life Science for Middle School, Chemistry, Trigonometry, Middle School Math Grade 6 – Volume 1 of 2, Commonsense Composition*, well, you get the idea...

If you take a look at the Physics book, you'll find it's reasonably well written, sometimes colorfully illustrated, and features hyperlinks embedded in the text. It's published under a **Creative Commons** license.

To indulge in one of today's most popular pastimes, the standing-up of a strawman argument for the sole purpose of cutting it down, do I think we should shut down all the K-12 school libraries, send all their books to Mars (or some other planet affected by cataclysmic climate change), and toss the publishers and sellers of K-12 textbooks onto the scrapheap of History? Certainly not! And they shouldn't or won't willingly lie down on that scrapheap all by themselves, either.

I've clipped recipes from newspapers. Does that mean publishers should be made to stop printing cookbooks? How about if I've done a Google search for "Potatoes Au Gratin"? The key phrase here is "...made to." I'm free to employ a recipe published in a newspaper, in a cookbook I've borrowed from my public library, or read off of my cell phone (protected by its spill-proof cover, of course).

By the same token, privately-held industry is free to manufacture or publish what it will, to "go with the flow," or "swim upstream" in the marketplace, as however best fits their strategic plan. School boards have the right to make choices, and do.

Those manufacturers of buggy whip holders, back in the day, were free to continue to make buggy whip holders for as long as they wished. How long was dependent upon their willingness to absorb the pressures resulting from a dramatic drop in demand, a shrinking market, and cut-throat competition as rival buggy whip holder manufacturers sold off remaining inventory. Some of the buggy whip holders survived by switching to making clips into which to clip your horseless carriage's starting crank.

And as I've pointed out more than once over the years, most of those folks, even those who thought about horseless carriages, thought about them as "horseless carriages," not as "automobiles," the term not yet having come into common use.

We're in such times today. Even, lo, these many years into the "digital revolution," or whatever you want to call it, we still have trouble thinking about Emerging Things except in terms relating to things with which we're already familiar.

I think there's good reason for hope. And I hope, one day, in some pan-galactic future, some future counterpart of mine will truthfully be able to say, "It's getting so that you can't swing a post-molting Zambozian lava beast without hitting an out-of-work moirologist!" 🐾