

2013

## ATG Special Report--Thoughts on the AHA Statement on Embargoes and Dissertations

Steven Escar Smith

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*, [stevensmith@utk.edu](mailto:stevensmith@utk.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Smith, Steven Escar (2013) "ATG Special Report--Thoughts on the AHA Statement on Embargoes and Dissertations," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 6, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7413>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

# ATG Special Report — Thoughts on the AHA Statement on Embargoes and Dissertations

by **Steven (Steve) Escar Smith, PhD** (Professor & Dean of Libraries, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996; Phone: 865-974-6600) <stevensmith@utk.edu>

**T** rue confession — when I finished my dissertation back in the bad old days of red-lined paper and buckram bindings, I asked for an embargo on its distribution by microfiche. The **American Historical Association**, based on its recent statement, thinks that today's young scholars should have the option of doing likewise, only for longer than I could, and microfiche distribution is not the concern (<http://blog.historians.org/2013/07/american-historical-association-statement-on-policies-regarding-the-embargoing-of-completed-history-phd-dissertations/>).

The **AHA's** worry is the availability of dissertations in university-hosted digital repositories for free. The monograph, the argument goes, is still the main form of scholarly communication in the profession. As such, tenure and promotion committees routinely require the publication of a book for tenure. Apparently some editors of scholarly presses have expressed reservations about publishing work derived from dissertations and theses that are openly available on the Web. These circumstances place young scholars in a tough spot. By putting the fruits of their graduate work online, students handicap their chance for tenure down the road.

The **AHA** solution — give students the option to keep their dissertations offline for up to six years, long enough to allow for the publication of their first book. I should add that the **AHA's** concern is exclusively with the online environment. The statement recommends that students who opt for the embargo should deposit a print version of their dissertation with the library for distribution through interlibrary loan or microfiche. The difficulty here is that

print dissertations (along with the infrastructure that existed to support them) have largely gone the way of the typewriters on which they were written.

I now realize my decision to exempt my research from the journeyman distribution network of the day was wrong. Granted, my PhD is in English, but my topic was a work of literary history. The embargo did absolutely nothing to improve my chances of sharing my findings or promoting my scholarship. My fear of a publisher declining my work because it might have been available elsewhere was a boogeyman. And despite the vast difference in broadcast power between microfiche and the Internet, I believe this concern is as specious today as it was in my time.

As others have already pointed out, there's little evidence that editors are behaving in the way the **AHA** describes (<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/07/youve-spent-years-on-your-phd-should-you-publish-it-online-for-free/278024/>). But even if they were, the logic of the proposal is flawed. If I am frugal enough to forego purchasing the printed monograph in preference for the online thesis, why would I not just wait out the embargo? If the self-imposed ban lasts six years because that's how long it takes to achieve tenure and publish one's first monograph, I would not have to wait that much longer to read the dissertation online anyway. And considering the challenges of publishing anything in physical form these days, the electronic version still might beat the print book to the street.

The **AHA** proposal acknowledges that the dissertation and the book that derives from it are supposed to be very different things. But this is one of the points that call its recommendation into question. If a dissertation is not substantially revised for monographic publication, the author **SHOULD** have a hard time finding a publisher, whether or not an electronic ancestor lurks online. The dissertation is the result of a journeyman apprenticeship; the first book is the product of a credentialed professional. It's expected that elements of the former have evolved and even changed for the latter. Any editor that would publish a work that is not only much different from but much better than the dissertation should probably not be in the publishing business. Furthermore, scholars are trained to use sources responsibly and critically, so any historian who is content to draw on someone else's dissertation to the exclusion of the monograph needs to repeat his own apprenticeship.

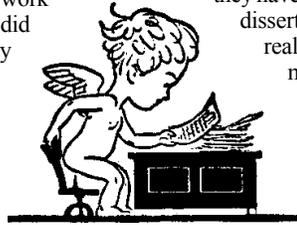
The **AHA** solution also ignores or misunderstands the realities of the current academic publishing market. Libraries are still the major

market for academic historical monographs, though granted not on the scale of yesteryear. Where a university press print run might have been 1,500 copies two decades ago, something along the lines of 200 or fewer in many fields is more likely today. But these smaller print runs have more to do with shrinking library budgets; they have nothing at all to do with electronic dissertations. And this point gets at the real problem that the **AHA** statement misses, and that is that the market for publication is increasingly difficult because presses are not able to publish as many books, largely as a result of fewer library dollars being available to purchase them.

A better way of helping early career scholars over the tenure bar has already been suggested by the **AHA** — more than once. In 1993 the association argued for a more capacious definition of scholarship in response to concerns about the devaluation of teaching and service (<http://www.historians.org/pubs/free/RedefiningScholarship.htm>). A very strong statement in support of digital forms of scholarship was made by the association in 2001 (<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2001/0110/0110pro1.cfm>). And in 2005 the **AHA** along with the **National Council on Public History** and the **Organization of American Historians** stated flatly that the "current standards for evaluating historical scholarship for tenure and promotion do not reflect the great variety of historical practice undertaken by faculty members" (<http://www.historians.org/governance/pd/EngagedHistorianReport-June2010.pdf>).

The **AHA** has a long and admirable record of encouraging a broad understanding of historical practice. It should continue this tradition by standing up for articles, essays, blogs, digital archives, scholarly Websites, presentations, excellent teaching, impactful service, and other evidences of academic and intellectual achievement in addition to the book. It should emphasize the rigorous review of content, not a preference for one kind of research expression. Keeping dissertations under wraps for long periods of time is a solution that misses the real problem, encourages the perpetuation of a system that is indeed increasingly difficult for young historians, and is, ironically, at odds with the association's own history. 🍄

*Note: Steven Escar Smith is Professor and Dean of Libraries, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Further disclosure — most of his dissertation was later published (in revised and he hopes improved form) in two articles. The long-awaited third and final article has suffered under the embargo of procrastination.*



## Interview — Benjamin Shaw from page 51

**BS:** I've been in Beijing since early 2005 and consider it home. I was originally here studying Chinese full-time for ten months, though I'm still a lifetime away from reaching my language goals. Beijing can be a challenging place to live, but those who come to love it are rewarded with a dynamic city full of interesting people. Readers who haven't yet visited might be surprised to learn that Beijing has a diverse food scene. I spend much of my free time scouting for, eating at, and talking about the many great restaurants here.

**ATG:** Ben, thank you so much for talking to us. You've been both forthcoming and informative. We really appreciate it.

**BS:** Thanks for the opportunity, and a big thanks to your readers. 🍄