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From a University Press--Churchill University Press

Mick Gusinde-Duffy

The University of Georgia Press, mickgd@uga.edu

Leila W. Salisbury

University Press of Kentucky, lsalisbury@uky.edu

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Why Peer Review is the Worst Form of Quality Control and Credentialing Except All Those Other Forms that Have Been Tried From Time to Time.

by **Mick Gusinde-Duffy** (Editor-in-Chief, The University of Georgia Press, Main Library, Third Floor, 320 South Jackson Street, Athens, GA 30602; Phone: 706-542-9907) <mickgd@uga.edu> www.ugapress.org

Column Editor: **Leila W. Salisbury** (Director, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40508) <lsalisbury@uky.edu> <salisburyleila@gmail.com>



Author's Note: *The Association of American University Presses (AAUP) recently published a Best Practices for Peer Review Handbook. The result of a two-year consensus-building (and peer reviewed) effort by the organization and a subcommittee of seasoned acquiring editors, the 26-page booklet articulates a set of practices that constitute a rigorous peer review process for academic book publishers. Sections of the book include: Why Peer Review is important; The Acquiring Editor's Choices about Why, When, and How to Conduct Peer Review; Selecting Peer reviewers; Sharing Peer Reviews With Authors; and Peer Reviews as Documents of Record. You can download a Creative Commons licensed edition of the Handbook at: <http://www.aaupnet.org/resources-for-members/handbooks-and-toolkits/peer-review-best-practices>. — MGD*

I frequently make a Big Deal about our capacity and competence with the peer review process for the books that we publish. And I recently had the opportunity to put my mouth where my money is when I helped craft a *Best Practices for Peer Review Handbook* (see <http://bit.ly/1TXsDaz>) for the **Association of American University Presses (AAUP)**. I'd like to share some thoughts on the motivation behind that handbook (my thoughts, which are not necessarily the AAUP Board's thoughts nor those of the AAUP Acquisitions Committee that drafted the Handbook).

What follows, then, is one editor's reflection on Peer Review's past,¹ present, and future, as revealed through the decision to publish a *Best Practice Handbook*. My thoughts reflect my world of *book*² publishing in the humanities and social sciences, though some of the "macro" phenomena in play here certainly apply across the academy.

So why *did* AAUP, after 70-plus years decide that they needed to research and publish these fundamental guidelines for peer review best practice? I suspect it comes down to the simultaneous expansion and adaptation of our scholarly publishing landscape. This ongoing transition is an oft-told tale. As institutional support for scholarship (especially scholarship's publication) dwindles, and as "conventional" markets for cost recovery (book sales) also wither on the vine, scholarly presses are exploring new models for dissemination and cost recovery. On a related track, academic institutions and their funders (public and private) are seeking ways to have research they feel they have already funded more broadly accessible without fees or other barriers to all readers/con-

sumers (Open Access). Publishers, therefore, are experimenting with "flipped" publishing models, where the costs of publication are paid upfront by producers rather than consumers of the works (costs that include overhead for the entire publishing project, the print and bind cost for a book version of a project is a pretty small percentage of the whole).

Interestingly, at the same time as these economic and technological changes are taking place, university presses are publishing more books than ever³. And membership in the AAUP is expanding. There are new university presses emerging⁴ as top-flight universities revisit the "value add" of a focused, reputable university press that can expand their capacity for research, teaching, service, and, yes, their "brand."

All of this churning has presented challenges, to be sure, but it has also produced opportunities. I mentioned above that there are some new university presses emerging. Add to that the growth of library publishing initiatives, as well as government and professional organizations lifting their information dissemination game.

Which brings me back to the AAUP. I think it's safe to say that the AAUP regards itself as a "big tent" organization, encouraging and recruiting fellow travelers (or fellow campers, perhaps) — sometimes as full-fledged members, sometimes associate members, and sometimes just peers working on a shared set of activities, such as getting work that edifies in front of readers who wish to be edified.

So as the organization works on exploring new partnerships, it also needed to define what the "core competencies" of a good university press might be. The AAUP's current guidelines for full membership say a press, "must have a committee or board of the faculty (or equivalent, if the press is not affiliated with a university) that certifies the scholarly quality of the books published through peer review consistent with commonly understood notions of peer review."

Which begs the question, "what *are* our commonly understood notions of peer review?" That is what our acquisitions editor committee tried to find out. I won't go into the details of where we landed regarding commonly understood notions, but those who visit the handbook will see that we were aware of a pretty diverse set of practices. As the report explains, "the peer review process is highly complex, involves many individuals, and must be responsive to the norms of the appropriate fields."⁵

But, again, this was a broad brush look at best practice. There is a lot of the "art" of acquisitions as it pertains to peer review that we did not have the pages to explore fully. As an example, in the

section on choosing appropriate peer reviewers, we foregrounded a reader's potential to judge the scholarship/argument/presentation of a work. But we could have supplemented that section with more discussion of diversity, identity, and balance. Gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, and other categories and identities are a significant part of the more nuanced decisions and considerations that editors and their advisers think through as they manage peer review — more so in some disciplines than others.

The AAUP handbook joins an ongoing, vigorous discussion about the importance, proper execution, and assorted flaws of peer review. I would hate to think that some readers may see the *Best Practice Handbook* as a "rear-guard" action, defending the academic press world from hordes of charlatan invaders. In addition to striving for a "best practice" that secures membership and reassures the scholarly ecosystem, university presses are also eager to experiment with alternate models for evaluating and strengthening good scholarship.⁶ What these discussions hold for the future is hard to say. We have been discussing new measures for credentialing scholarship and for disseminating scholarship for all of the 27 years I have worked in publishing. I will note here that the conversation has become more global (another source of the AAUP's growth), and the cohort of publishers working with (or within) academic institutions is becoming ever more connected. All positive signs for innovation and improved practices, I'd say. So, the conversation continues and it is my hope that the AAUP Handbook serves as a helpful catalyst for that conversation as well as a "baseline" for scholars, administrators, and institutions that support scholarly presses.

One of my favorite "inspirational" quotes that I think describes quite well the university press world comes from **John Gardner** (Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under **President Lyndon Johnson**): "The society which scorns excellence in plumbing as a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy: neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water." This simple truth reminds me that we must cultivate the very best ideas, test and re-test those ideas (peer review), and maintain the very best "pipes" to disseminate those same ideas as broadly and cost effectively as possible (books, eBooks, Websites, blogs, apps) to a readership that remains eager to learn.

It is my view that the ideas, the pipes, and the learning all require financial support. We are plumbers and philosophers all.

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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Nightmare

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>



A large room in an apartment on a high floor in a new building somewhere in Eastern Europe: it is after midnight, the night sky is clear. Moonlight illuminates gentle waves that slide back and forth on the beach that is across the road from the apartment building. There are no streetlights on the deserted road. The windows of the tall building are dark, except for a faint glow behind one broad window, high up.

The room, lit only by a laptop's screen, is sleekly furnished, with tan leather and steel chairs at one end and a matching sofa that faces toward the water. In front of the sofa, there is a low glass and metal table with only an empty blue ceramic bowl on the surface. In the dim light, it is not evident what are behind the glass protecting the large framed objects that hang on the walls.

At the end of the room opposite the chairs, a young woman sits on a high-backed leather chair in front of a laptop set on an otherwise bare small, elegant table of polished blond wood. The young woman faces the room. In the daytime, when she turns slightly to her left, she can see in the far distance the horizon where the water meets the sky and where large ships move slowly from right to left. Always in that direction. At least once a day, she will roll her chair close to the floor-to-ceiling window and with a pair of high-powered binoculars watch the ships, looking for a flash of sunlight that might indicate that someone might be watching her building or even her apartment. After a few moments, she will laugh softly and shake her head.

She leaves the apartment only in the evening, after dark, in a new Mercedes SUV that she parks in the garage under the apartment building. She will drive on unlit roads with the windows open, letting the breeze hit her face. It does not ruffle her hair, which is under a well-fitted dark wig. She wears dark glasses, which have special lenses; even though it is night and wherever she goes, she can see perfectly well. The point is, no one can know who she is. The Mercedes dealer didn't know; she has created papers that can pass any inspection.

Some nights, she will stop at a restaurant that is isolated or at the outer edge of a town or small city. She might have a meal before she finds an empty place at the bar. She will talk with the bartender, which she has learned is a signal that she is open to talking with other drinkers. She has learned to recognize people like herself — usually men, but occasionally women — who don't want anyone to know who they are and where they might be. They don't ask her questions about herself, so, she knows, she won't be encouraged to ask questions about them. She can quickly tell whether someone she's just met has

spent a working life behind a desk, undoubtedly in front of a computer screen, or at a teller's or cashier's window. Those, she has determined, are the least threatening among the people she encounters on what she realizes are hunting expeditions. When she decides that the risk of a physical attack is minimal, there will be an invitation for a quick bout of frantic sex in the back of her SUV. On the way home, the itch no longer needing to be scratched, she will stop for groceries at one of the few small stores that stays open unusually late in this part of the world.

Other nights, when there is no moon, she will don the wig and dark glasses and go for a jog on the beach. The beach will be dark, and drivers on the unlit road that runs along the length of the beach will not notice her. With each breath she takes on those carefree jogs she will think about how satisfying the important aspects of her life feel to her, despite her need to be cautious about revealing her identity and her whereabouts.

Tonight, she is staying at home. At two o'clock her laptop will receive an encrypted face-to-face call from two academics in the United States. She does not know their real names. On these calls, even with the encryption, they use the names Ben and Jerry. They wear masks and employ a device that alters their voices. They have told the young woman emphatically whenever she has asked for some clue to their identities that they do not trust the encryption app that she uses. Their unwillingness to let her know anything about them troubles her. But they have provided so many details of their activities on behalf of her project that she cannot conjure up any good reason not to trust them.

Ben and Jerry call the young woman Natalie, because, as the one who calls himself Ben has put it, if Hollywood were making a movie about her, studios execs would find someone who resembles **Natalie Wood** to play her — someone of Eastern Europe parentage who looks like a Hollywood princess, Jerry added. A week ago they told her that they will indeed be discussing a movie about her — a docudrama, they call it — that they will be pitching (a sexy word to her) to public television stations in the U.S. The working title, for now, is *Robin Hood of Scholarly Publishing* — until they can think of something better.

For the past week, the young woman has fretted over questions that they may have to find answers for. After all, not everyone has been in favor of, let alone sympathetic to her project. She worries about suspicions that she and others who have worked on the project have phished for passwords to university library systems that enabled downloading of journal papers residing behind walls meant to restrict such access to only university affiliated students and faculty members. Are all the passwords, purloined or not, safe? Will her defying the American judge's order to shut down the site with the downloaded papers eventually make legal trouble for the students and faculty members who have donated their passwords? What will people think of her when they learn of her apartment, her Mercedes, her clothes, the money she has for dinners and drinks? What names will they call her when the press announces how she plans to dispose of the project? These last two questions trouble the young woman the most. Wondering who Ben and Jerry might be is a minor issue by comparison.

At this moment the young woman is calm. She has always relied on United Nations Charter language about the rights of all mankind to have access to the wealth of the world's knowledge. It cannot be sequestered behind pay walls and be available only to those fortunate to be living in rich countries. That is the mantra that answers any demanding question anyone can dream up, and no matter how adamant the questioner.

The young woman swivels her desk chair so that she is looking at the blackness of the huge window. She closes her eyes. Ben and Jerry will be on her laptop screen in just a minute or two. Suddenly the room is filled with bright light. A pair of powerful hands takes hold of her shoulders and spins her around. She sees several men, large men, dressed in black, watch caps pulled down to the tops of masks covering their faces.

A large, rough hand takes hold of the young woman's chin. She cries out: "What do you want?"

The hand turns the young woman's face to the laptop screen. Ben and Jerry are there. They remove their masks. They have painted clown faces. When they speak, their voices sound like she imagined their real voices might sound.

"What do we want, little Natalie? The passwords, of course. What would you think? All them lovely passwords," they sing out in unison, their lips curved in half-moon leers.

The young woman screams. 

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Endnotes

1. For some background on peer review, **Trevor Lipscombe** wrote a marvelous essay on the sectarian origins of peer review and how that has trickled down to the present day ("Burn this Article" — see <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/613577>). And I describe elsewhere (see <https://ugapress.wordpress.com/2016/06/16/peering-into-the-dark-underbelly-of-peer-review-or-practice-makes-best/>) our committee's own peer review and drafting process that produced the handbook.
2. I've had some experience with online publishing of digital scholarship, but that remains more experimental to-date and our *Best Practice Handbook* focused on more established book conventions.
3. Based on reported numbers from **AAUP Annual Directory of Presses**, 2000 through 2015. See also **Crossick, Geoffrey**. "Monographs and Open Access: A report to HEFCE." Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), January 2015, p. 21, which reports title output of monographs among the four biggest academic presses as doubling between 2004 and 2013.
4. The number of new presses is small, in North America at least. I know of at least two new Presses in the past couple of years, with at least two more in the start-up phase (some have not announced publicly).
5. **AAUP**. *Best Practices for Peer Review*. 2016, p. 6.
6. For example, **Claire Potter** at the New School is in the midst of an experiment with **UNC Press**, writing her next book in a shared environment (see <http://digitalulab.org/2016/06/05/why-blog-a-book/>) that allows ongoing comments as she writes and rewrites about the future of digital scholarship.