

2016

I'll Take "Sifting and Winnowing" for \$1000, Alex

Dennis Lloyd

University of Wisconsin Press, dlloyd2@wisc.edu

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



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

Recommended Citation

Lloyd, Dennis (2016) "I'll Take "Sifting and Winnowing" for \$1000, Alex," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 28: Iss. 6, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7554>

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

I'll take "Sifting and Winnowing" for \$1000, Alex

by **Dennis Lloyd** (Director, University of Wisconsin Press) <dloyd2@wisc.edu>

Last year, I appeared as a contestant on *Jeopardy!* I came in third. Which sounds pretty good if you ignore the fact that the game is played with only three contestants. Unless you also bear in mind that more than 70,000 took the online test last year — the first step in getting onto the show. Only about 450 new players appear on air each season, which still put me in the top 0.65% — an unheard-of acceptance rate in the field of scholarly publishing, where I've worked for the past two decades.

Also last year, I was appointed director of the **University of Wisconsin Press**. This took place around the same time that **Gov. Scott Walker** made the news for attempting to dismantle the Wisconsin Idea. Most famously elucidated by **UW President Charles Van Hise** in 1904 when he declared he would "never be content until the influence of the university reaches every family in the state," this philosophy is one of two cornerstones of our academic identity. The other is a well-known quote from an 1894 Board of Regents report about academic freedom, which asserted that Wisconsin "should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found."

After the adrenaline (and disappointment) from my game show performance wore off, I found myself returning to this phrase again and again. While originally written to defend the liberal and pro-union economics professor **Richard T. Ely** against charges made by then state education superintendent **Oliver Elwin Wells**, it struck me — and continues to strike me — as an excellent summation of the selection process for book or journal publication, which includes peer review as well as the role of the acquisitions editor (for books) or the volume editor (for journals or essay collections). Further, I began to see ways in which the review process by which *Jeopardy!* contestants are chosen might serve as a metaphor for how we determine what (and who) gets published.

The first step in appearing on "America's favorite quiz show" is to take a fifty-question online test, which is offered once a year. To get to the next stage one has to have both knowledge (demonstrated by answering a high percentage of questions accurately) and luck (typically more people meet the first criteria than there are audition slots available). The 2,500–3,500 people invited to an in-person audition must take another fifty-question test and be videotaped playing a sample game and answering questions about themselves. The producers are looking not only for individuals who can play the game well, they're looking for people who make good TV, who smile, who

look comfortable, who convey fun. They also must aim for gender and ethnic diversity. An invitation to travel to LA for a taping can take up to 18 months — or it may not come at all, in which case it's back to square one for the determined contestant.

For HSS book publishing, the area in which I've spent my entire career, the process is similar, if on a smaller scale — with differences in percentages at each cut. Hundreds of hopeful authors submit proposals or inquiry letters; many are politely declined, either because they don't fit with the list or do not yet seem fully formed. Those who make the next stage (the percentages vary, depending in part upon how one defines the initial inquiry, but 10–15% is perhaps a safe assumption) send in completed manuscripts, which are shared with peer reviewers. Some of these are declined, others are asked to revise and resubmit, others are accepted for publication — but most make it through the review process eventually, thus highlighting the key role played by acquisitions editors in the initial selection process. In making the final decision, publishers are looking not only for the best scholarship but the best addition to their list, the ones that will sell well or burnish their reputation, or help them acquire the next project, or some combination of the above.

In both situations, the sifting and winnowing is a key part of the process. The television show is popular in part because of the quality of the contestants; if the screening process weren't as severe, perhaps the show wouldn't have lasted 33 seasons (and counting). In addition, stories abound of aspiring players who take the test for years and are invited to multiple auditions before finally receiving the coveted "call," not because they increased their raw knowledge but because they improved their on-camera performance.

Likewise, every university press acquisitions editor has a favorite project that went through multiple rounds of readings only to emerge as a stronger project than anyone could have initially imagined. Built into the peer review process is the assumption that constructive, objective criticism helps the author focus their argument. In many ways, it's no wonder that administrators and others who help make tenure and promotion decisions have depended upon publishers' rigorous selection criteria to help ensure scholarly merit and quality.

It is this entrenched system that some proponents of Open Access seem to want to blow up. Particularly in the STEM fields, megajournals such as *PLOS One* have successfully pioneered the concept of post-publication peer review. Put the work out there,

the argument goes, and see what happens. In metaphoric terms, it would be as if the producers of *Jeopardy!* chose not to whittle the contestant pool down, but gave us (almost) all 70,000 players to watch and to decide ourselves who truly deserved to appear on the show.

As ludicrous as this sounds, in certain fields this might actually represent the better approach to peer review. Let's say I'm conducting research in combating MS and am working with a specific protein. As I review the existing literature, I don't want to know only the success stories; I want to know what failed, how similar proteins behaved, what were the effects on other conditions. I also need to know these things urgently, in order to apply them to my ongoing research; after all, actual lives may be at stake. In other words, I need to be able to access and review a broad swath of research, unfettered by a selection process that — from my perspective — hides things from me or a pay-to-read model that prevents me from reading the articles I can't access.

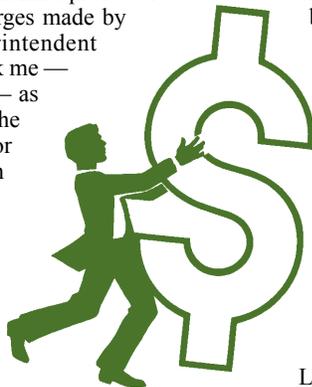
In a world where a few thousand dollars can be added to a grant to cover the costs of publication, this is a very appealing model. If I were the director of a publisher in the STEM fields, it would also help me extend the reach of the university throughout the state, the country, and the world, helping fulfill the Wisconsin Idea that almost sounds as though it could have been written as a pro-OA bullet point.

And yet.

Does this model translate to the humanities or nonquantifiable social sciences? I'm not convinced. As **Karin Wulf** eloquently reminded us in a **Scholarly Kitchen** post last year, "humanities scholarship is not a reporting of research results, but evidence-based argument developed through narrative and analysis." If, say, I'm a musicologist examining the development of the chorus in eighteenth-century opera, I need to focus on archival documents and pay attention to the most well-crafted interpretations of similar materials in other research projects. I don't need — nor do I want — to review every scrap written to offer one explanation or another. I benefit when someone else rigorously vets similar work, focusing on quality of writing, depth of contribution to my field, and cleverness of argument. To return to my governing metaphor: I want to watch the smallest sample possible compete on the game show. In short, curation deeply matters to me.

In addition, within the STEM fields, a freely available article describing one's research doesn't prohibit one (or one's university) from monetizing and patenting the results of that research. That is not the case in HSS fields. To quote **Karin Wulf** again, from a different **Scholarly Kitchen** post, "for creative writers and humanists ... narrative structure and ar-

continued on page 16



changes are accepted and any loose ends resolved. The production editor checks to make sure all the various elements of the manuscript match each other. Do the note numbers in the text agree with the note numbers in the endnotes? Does the table of contents match the chapter titles? Do the captions refer to the correct illustrations? If a figure, table, or quotation is taken from another source, does the author have permission, and is appropriate credit given?

In addition, the files are readied for typesetting. Every element of the manuscript — the basic text, chapter titles, epigraphs, subheads, block quotations, lists, endnotes, illustration captions, and so on — must be identified and tagged. The book's designer provides "specifications" for each element so the typesetter can make it look the desired way.

The typesetter formats the manuscript, creating "page proofs," or "first pages," which show the design and pagination of the print edition, with illustrations and tables in place. Now that the page numbers are set, the index can be assembled. At the same time the author, and sometimes a professional proofreader as well, can read the entire book and mark errors that need fixing. This is the last chance to correct facts, dates, and names. For example, in a book of biblical studies, Esau's father was identified as Jacob rather than Isaac; the proofreader caught the error and queried the author. The proofreader may also flag inconsistencies missed in the copyediting stage: "In the text it reads 'wife,' but she was described as his mistress in note 11." Although such mistakes can be fixed, the layout is now final and indexing is under way, so any additions to the proofs have to be compensated for by deletions of the same length, just as deletions have to be compensated for by additions.

The main reason to read page proofs is not to catch previously overlooked errors but to identify any *new* errors that occurred during typesetting. In our computer age, the text isn't retyped, so typos don't usually creep in as they used to in the days of hot metal, but there can be

technical glitches involving fonts (especially if the book contains non-Latin alphabets or other special characters), unanticipated issues with layout, and inconsistencies among elements that need to match.

Production editors are trained to be on the lookout for such problems. The production editor reviews the author's changes carefully, collates them with the proofreader's, reviews and edits the index, and ensures that every necessary change is correctly implemented. The production editor also reviews jacket copy and blurbs, and proofs and reproofs the designed jacket. In the process of all this review, the production editor may detect errors that no one else has found. In one set of page proofs, a figure caption read, in part, "Three graphs with progressively decreasing density, from left to right." But the production editor noticed that the three graphs were not placed side by side but were stacked from top to bottom, and the highest-density figure was in the middle, not on top. She alerted the authors, who reworded the caption and reordered the graphs.

Every editor can tell a story about a mistake (usually a misspelled proper name, like Georg Lukács spelled "Lukács" or Bill McKibben spelled "McKibbin") missed by author, copyeditor, and proofreader but found by the production editor right before the book went to press. At the end of the revision process, the book may not be perfect, but it will be as close as professional eyes can make it.

As the book is readied for printing, the eBook files are also prepared, in ways that vary somewhat among university presses. Usually the process is largely automated, but the files for the eBook formats — Kindle, iBook, universal pdf — may need to be checked by a human to fix conversion glitches. For example, **Yale University Press** uses an eBook vendor whose conversion process automatically inserts links to other chapters in the book: if an author writes "See chapter 2," the reader can click that link in the eBook and go right to the new chapter. But with at least one book in the field of biblical criticism, most of the references to "chapter" were actually to the Bible, not to the eBook in hand. The links needed to be found and removed.

All this checking — of the text, the illustrations, the jacket, the laid-out pages, and so on — takes a lot of time, and therefore money. Our authors relish the attention to detail and feel that the time is well spent, but we wonder how the process could be streamlined. One way would be to produce fewer formats. If a book were neither printed nor made available as a "fixed-format" (pdf) file, there would be no need for page proofs as we know them. We could go from copyedited, cleaned-up manuscript to a reflowable-format eBook. Conversely, if a book were available only in print, we could eliminate the steps of eBook conversion and quality control. It's more likely, though, that multiple formats will continue to be useful and requested, so perhaps it's the software that will evolve, to allow for smoother conversion between the various fixed and reflowable book formats. There will still be a need for skilled production editors to ensure that changes appropriate to each format are properly implemented.

In this future scenario, as in our current landscape, the three components of the ideal editorial process will be quality, timing, and author relations. A high standard of quality means copyediting that, above all, does not compromise the author's intent or style but improves the book's clarity, consistency, and correctness; and it means project management that involves catching mistakes and not inserting new errors at any stage. Quality standards must be met while adhering to a schedule that accords with the project's publishing needs. Is the author doing fieldwork in Ghana without an Internet connection for three months? The production editor will find a way to get the book done in time for the right academic conference, while attending to twenty or so other projects, each with its own constraints. Maintaining quality and keeping to a schedule are impossible, however, without the cooperation of the author, which is why developing the best possible relations with authors is paramount. Establishing trust and good communication requires care, tact, judgment, and sensitivity. Working closely with authors to negotiate schedules, revisions in proof, design issues, and every aspect of the book's production may take as much time and skill as copyediting or proofreading. If upon a book's publication the authors feel, as one told her production editor, that they have partnered with a "team of intrepid editors, whose work makes us look better than we are," then our goal is achieved. 🍷

gument *are* the research product" (emphasis added). Adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to "scholarly articles," as an increasing number of universities are doing in establishing OA policies, seems problematic to me.

The impacts of technological developments on scholarly publishing have been enormous (one need only compare a mail room today with one from thirty years ago for a striking, pragmatic example). And every library and publisher I speak with now acknowledges that,

as revolutionary as Open Access has been, it won't completely supplant other means of dissemination. As we move forward, exploring new models, I remain convinced that the sifting and winnowing—what others have called the "gatekeeping" role of academic publishers — remains central. Yes, perhaps this will cause a given manuscript to be delayed in reaching its audience. But the urgency of speed of publication is different for articles on Zika research compared to an analysis of Chaucer's description of the astrolabe. Besides, not everyone appears on *Jeopardy!* the first time they try out. 🍷

Endnotes

1. **Jerome Kagan**, *On Being Human* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. xiv.
2. **Zara Anishanslin**, *Portrait of a Woman in Silk: Hidden Histories of the British Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 408–9; **Alon Tal**, *The Land Is Full: Addressing Overpopulation in Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. xxiii; **Max Page**, *Why Preservation Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. x–xi.