How to Succeed in Publishing Without Really Trying

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By Bryn Geffert

My Dear Wormwood,

So you aspire to become an academic publishing magnate. You noble devil.

Supporting the life of the mind. Disseminating research conducted in the public interest. Sharing the output of the academy with those beyond our ivy-encrusted walls. Making information universally accessible. Enlightening the world.

Concerned only for the common good, with no thought of profit.

Such care for the scholarship, the academy, the developed world, the developing world.

Such altruism. Such nobility of soul.

Your mother raised you right, young man. I am prouder than I can say.

Your Admiring Uncle,

Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

For Hades' sake, you dolt! You wouldn't recognize sarcasm if it bit you in the nose.

Of course I was joking.

Who in their right mind still takes such nonsense seriously? Only the blathering idealists still running university presses. Only the luddites still committed to self-righteous clap-trap.

“We want to make scholarship widely available,” they say. “We believe research should be available even to those without deep pockets.” “The academy and its literature still have relevance for the taxpayers and donors who support it.” “Information serves a public good.”

Well lah-de-dah.

How’s that working for them?


University of Missouri Press? Mizzou’s president announced its pending demise last month.

And those that remain? Finding it ever more difficult to espouse their lofty ideals with a straight face.

Consider: Cambridge University Press once printed 3,500-5,500 copies of each book it published. Today Cambridge publishes, on average, fewer than 500 copies per title. By 1997 Yale University Press reported a two-thirds decline in the sale of scholarly monographs. And in 2002 Rutgers University Press reported that it could rely on only about 200 libraries to purchase a copy of any given monograph.

Only the wealthiest institutions can still afford to purchase significant numbers of books from university presses, despite those presses’ sincere (how I hate that word) attempts to keep a lid on prices, and their genuine (like fingernails on a chalkboard) desire to serve the academy.

Aspirations for enlightenment and public dissemination of scholarship? How many people on the planet can you enlighten with 200 copies of a book in just 200 libraries? Please.

University presses can’t even serve the disciplines they purport to serve. Oxford cut its Contemporary Poetry series. Cambridge cut French Studies. Spend some time perusing the annual directory of the American Association of University Presses and you’ll discover that between 1993 and 2010, some 56 disciplines lost presses.

You think you can persuade parent institutions to subsidize your money-losing press while legislatures slash allocations for higher education? Who wants to think about scholarship in the public
interest in times like these? Nobody, that’s who.
No profit here, my boy. No future in altruism.
Clouds the mind.

Your Clear-Eyed Uncle,
Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

Well, of course you want no part of nonprofit, university publishing. Just wanted to make sure you weren’t enticed by the siren call of doing something useful.

You want profit, and lots of it.
And there’s profit galore in scholarly publishing, so long as you care not for principles. (And that, of course, is what I’ve always loved about you, my poppet.)

Take Elsevier, that beacon of hope, that luscious lair of lucre. The Economist reported that Elsevier posted 36 percent profit margins last year.
36 percent! Who makes that kind of money? Nobody! Ask Fortune: Pfizer managed less than 15 percent. Morgan Stanley: 12 percent. And Exxon Mobil: couldn’t even reach 9 percent. Amateurs, all.
But commercial academic publishing? Any half-brain — including you, my dearest — can produce similar results.

Just follow these five simple steps.
• Choose a name. Something Dutch and homey (Elsevier), lively and sprightly (Springer) or disarmingly honest (Wiley).
• Ignore books. Books are dead. Follow the money and focus on journals.
• Choose academic fields in which your workers produce product with no expectation of compensation. Crazy, am I? Who, you ask, would give you their work for free? Why, almost any scientist, social scientist, or humanist. In almost any discipline or subdiscipline. You name it. And get this: their own institutions and dozens of foundations gladly pay your authors’ salaries, fill their 403(b)s, buy their insurance, fund their travel, employ their administrative assistants, purchase their computers, build their labs, and subsidize their sabbaticals. It’s beautiful! All your authors’ expenses — covered by students’ tuition, federal and state governments, public and private foundations, alumni, and other donors. Your contributions to their salaries? Exactly $0 per hour. That’s better than Foxconn.
• And who must you pay to judge the quality of the submissions you receive? Nobody. That’s right. Most reviewers and referees will correspond with you, read article manuscripts, suggest revisions, and write reports, all for nothing. Nothing. Their own institutions pay their salaries, too. For your purposes, they also work for free! Hooray!

So let’s review. Your authors give you their articles gratis. The institutions and agencies that support your authors demand nothing from you in return. Experts who review the articles request no compensation.

But is this good enough for us? Not by a long shot.
• Now demand that colleges and universities pay you for the articles they just gave you for free. Uh huh. Charge the institutions (through their libraries) exorbitant fees to buy back their research. And by “exorbitant” I mean ex- or-bi-tant. You might name a journal, say, Biochimica et Biophysica Acta, and demand $20,930 per year. Or call it Brain Research and charge $24,047 per year. More than a Honda Civic. More than a student’s comprehensive fee at a flagship public university. If the schools need the articles they signed over to you (and you bet they do) they will pay you for them. It’s so simple. Even you can do it, my lovely.

Your Adoring Uncle,
Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

Many belated congratulations on launching your press. Bravo. I understand that you’ve already acquired some seminal journals.

But you’re losing sleep when libraries complain about your journals’ prices. Relax. Librarians are whiners. All fuss and bother; no action.
What are they going to do? Cancel the journals you acquired? Imagine the hue and cry from the faculty who rely on them. Most librarians won’t contemplate such action, devoted as they are (poor,
well-meaning saps) to the needs of faculty and students. You think they’ll band together with other libraries and mount a boycott? If they can’t bring themselves to disappoint faculty and students at their own institutions, how can they imagine disappointing those they serve at multiple institutions?

I suppose it is theoretically possible that the Association of Research Libraries or the Association of College and Research Libraries (yes, they are two different institutions, thus making my point about libraries’ inability to coordinate on this or any other movement) might someday make noise about a boycott. If so, just make some noise in return about the unfortunate possibility of a lawsuit alleging restraint of trade.

Rest easy, my nephew. Your opponents are good-hearted cowards.

Your Brave Uncle,

Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

Now you tell me that competition is keeping you awake. Indeed. Bad stuff, competition. Liable to keep anybody awake.

But not to worry.

Simply eliminate it. Buy out your competitors. Contact the academic associations that either (a) produce themselves the journals that compete with yours, or that (b) contract with nonprofit university presses to produce their journals. Offer the associations and presses a fat wad of cash to lay their cares at your feet. Why should they trouble themselves over publishing with so much else on their busy little minds?

You will more than recoup your initial outlay when you corner the market in the disciplines and sub-disciplines you pursue. Monopolies, it must be said, offer exhilarating freedom to set your own prices. They’ve done wonders for Elsevier, Wiley and Springer. And they will do wonders for you, too.

Then try this.

Offer the libraries that subscribe to some of your journals a nice, big package that includes all of your journals for no additional fee. In other words, for what the libraries pay you now for a limited number of titles, offer them access to all your titles. All you ask in return is a pledge (in writing, of course) that they continue subscribing to the original titles. Wow! What a deal!

Of course you can then increase the prices on those original titles at rates far exceeding inflation. Kind of like an adjustable-rate mortgage that adjusts in only one direction. By the time the libraries realize how badly they’re in hock to you, their faculty will depend on all your journals, and the libraries will have no choice but to cough up the money for your extortionate fees.

To be sure, library budgets cannot keep pace with your price increases, increases that leave the cost-of-living index in the dust. How could they?

No matter. Demand for your journals will be so high at this point that libraries will have no choice but to either (a) cancel subscriptions to journals published by your competitors, or (b) slash book budgets. You doubt me? They’re doing it now. Look at the statistics, produced by the libraries themselves. If libraries are good at anything, it’s producing statistics that make my case.

Sure, a number of sanctimonious lawyers allege that such practices violate anti-trust statutes. But which justice department or which state attorney general will squander political capital on an issue that you insist concerns only pointy headed intellectuals?

Now get some sleep.

Sweet dreams,

Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

You remain ever so determined to worry yourself sick, do you not? Egad.

So a few simpletons bark in public that it makes no sense for colleges and universities to gift their research to presses like yours and then buy them back.

Of course it makes no sense! Sense is not the point.

The point is framing the argument to your advantage. These bleeding-heart naïfs call themselves “open-access” advocates and they clamor for “free access to literature produced in the public interest.” Give me a break. Smacks of socialism, if you ask me and the properly informed American people.

We can spin this much better than our
opponents. Remember the story (Apocryphal? Who cares?) of the publishing executive who insisted that medical literature should not be openly accessible lest patients ask their doctors too many questions? Lovely stuff. Absolutely demolishes the case for freely available information. Brings tears to my eyes, in fact.

And remember the industry lobbyist who warned the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform that university students and hospitals in China — China! — sometimes read open-access medical articles produced in the U.S.? Imagine Chinese doctors recommending treatment based on peer-reviewed research. Truly frightening.

So get thee before a Congressional committee and spin some arguments yourself. Let me get you started.

“What inspiration might a terrorist draw from an article re-examining the roots of the 1898 Boxer Rebellion?” I shudder to think.

“Do we really want any chucklehead to read federally funded research about migrating waterfowl? What if he decides to abandon his family, migrate south, and die alone and destitute in Mexico, convinced to the end that he’s a Canadian honker?”

Or, better yet, “Who cares whether college students at modestly endowed universities, secondary-school students in rural Mississippi, or professors in Rwanda can access Shakespeare scholarship?” Some people are destined to enjoy Elizabethan literature, and some are not. Let’s not mess with the natural order. No social engineering. To each his own station.”

See? It’s pretty easy once you get the hang of it.

Yours,

Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

O.K. We all know the culprits. Harvard, MIT, Oberlin, Columbia, Lafayette, Florida State — dozens of college and university faculties passing resolutions that either encourage or require their colleagues to mount copies of their articles on university web sites, thus allowing anybody with an internet connection to read the articles. Shocking.

Such resolutions promise faculty continued freedom to publish their work wherever they like; but they also discourage or forbid those same faculty from granting the publishers sole ownership of those articles. In other words, the colleges and universities (by votes of their faculty themselves — imagine that) retain the right to disseminate the research they produce. To anybody!

My head hurts.

Gotta go. My flight to the Hague is boarding. Some time with our colleagues at Elsevier in those Dutch coffee shops will, undoubtedly, help me take my mind off things.

Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

Well, O.K. I’m a bit scared too.

Who knew that those nimrods on Capitol Hill would slip a provision into page 260 of a 466-page omnibus spending bill (Who has time to read beyond page 3 of something titled PL 111-8?) requiring that all researchers who receive funds from the National Institutes of Health submit “an electronic version of their final, peer-reviewed manuscripts” to a database maintained by the National Library of Medicine?

This is hair-raising indeed. Those Dummköpfe in Congress have forbidden you from claiming sole ownership of the manuscripts your work-for-free laborers give you! Unconscionable! Even worse, the database to which the authors must post those articles — PubMed — is, get this, accessible to anybody with an internet connection! Chaos will ensue, mark my words.

And now Joe Lieberman and John Cornyn (Cornyn? Really?) want to extend the same requirement to research funded by a total of 11 federal agencies. Agencies that fund thousands of articles each year to which you deserve exclusive rights.

Government intervention at its most egregious. Death to S. 1373. Summon the lobbyists! Your 36 percent profit margins should buy you a right good gaggle of them.

To Arms,

Screwtape

My Dear, Brilliant, Industrious Wormwood,
Am I ever impressed. Bringing honor to your name, you wormed your way into the souls of Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) and Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) and brought forth a beauty: H.R. 3699, “The Research Works Act.”

Love it.

Short, sweet, and to the point. “No Federal agency may adopt, implement, maintain, continue, or otherwise engage in any policy, program, or other activity that (1) causes, permits, or authorizes network dissemination of any private-sector research work without the prior consent of the publisher of such work; or (2) requires that any actual or prospective author, or the employer of such an actual or prospective author, assent to network dissemination of a private-sector research work.”

For good measure, Issa and Maloney specify that “private sector research work” refers to articles in a “scientific publication ... describing or interpreting research funded in whole or in part by a Federal Agency.”

Whoopee! Research conducted in the public interest (I know, that phrase makes me giggle too) can now be locked safely away in publications for which only wealthy institutions can afford to pay you. If this thing passes nobody can force those accepting federal funds to share their publications with the hoi polloi. Thank Hades.

It’s about time those bozos in Washington acknowledge that federal money exists exclusively for private profit.

Your Free Market Uncle,

Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

When you should be out celebrating your victory you instead send me yet another fretful missive.

Enough!

Let me tell you exactly why the University of Michigan’s quest to undermine all we hold dear will fail. At best, it is half-baked. At worst, it is raw, salmonella-infused cookie dough: nausea-inducing idealism.

You recall that Michigan proclaimed back in 2009 that it would merge its press and library to create a new publishing model designed to disseminate its books “as freely and widely as possible.” Michigan now aims to publish scholarly monographs online, free of charge.

Right.

Who will take seriously a publisher that offers its wares for free? Everybody knows you get what you pay for. And how will an enterprise that gives away its products pay the bills? With subventions from the University Library, that’s how.

Let me assure you that librarians at Michigan will not stand for this. They will revolt against their carpet-bagging neighbors from the press when they learn that funds better spent on the library might be used to produce books for anybody, anywhere, i.e. not just for those paying U of M tuition. What an insult to the university’s students and faculty. What a waste of Michigan tax dollars. What a threat to monies now spent on Wormwood Press journals. Mark my words: havoc looms.

And I have it on good authority that Michigan’s 11-point loss to Ohio State in 2009 can be traced directly to the low morale that’s sweeping Ann Arbor following the announcement of the hare-brained scheme.

Go Buckeyes,

Screwtape

My Dear Wormwood,

Predictions of anarchy were, I admit, somewhat premature.

H.R. 3699 failed.

And yes, on 26 November 2011 Michigan did beat Ohio State for the first time in eight years.

But gridiron scores constitute the least of our problems.

Some Trotskyites running libraries and academic departments at other schools now speak publicly in gratitude for Michigan’s largess. And I hear that similar if less ambitious efforts are popping up at Utah State, Penn State, New York University, and elsewhere. You’ve done a poor job, lambkin, of fermenting the resentment that should be seething between librarians and editors at merged organizations.

They’re cooperating. You’ve failed.

The results are disturbing and conducive to all manner of unhealthy thinking. In fact I’ve caught wind of an argument that runs something like this. (Please, old man, do try to keep a straight face.)

• University publishing is crucial for the
health of the university and for society at large. It is also very expensive. Editors are expensive. Editing is expensive. Hence few academic presses can hope to make a profit on more than a handful of non-trade titles.

- Thus they might seriously consider distributing their products for free. (No snickering now, my dearie.)
- In fact free distribution can actually reduce costs, particularly if distribution is online. By eschewing ink on paper and by dispatching publications through the ether, say our opponents, university presses bear no printing costs, no shipping costs, no warehousing costs, no billing costs, and no advertising costs. Few expenses remain beyond the (still substantial) personnel and technological costs.

- Yes, some people will still demand print publications, our foes concede. Well and good, they respond. University presses can meet these demands by outsourcing the production of print versions to print-on-demand publishers, which will absorb the traditional costs of ink on paper, binding, and distribution, but not the now-nonexistent costs of offset printing and warehousing. The university press will probably receive no meaningful cut of print-on-demand profits, but at least it will bear none of the expense.

- So how do these dewy-eyed sentimentalists propose to cover the still-substantial personnel and ancillary expenses of an online, open-access press? By establishing a new press within the library, or by moving the existing university press under the library. The library can then, our rivals argue, contribute salary lines and money from acquisitions budgets to cover ancillary expenses. The library, in short, funds the press.

- So how, you ask in justified perplexity and apoplexy, how can libraries possibly contribute positions and funds as their own budgets decline?

- By claiming that a tipping point exists somewhere. In other words, yes, these nitwits concede, it will cost libraries exponentially more to produce books and journals than it will to buy them from existing publishers. Even from publishers like Wormwood Press.

However, these credulous mooncalves continue, when some presses begin to disseminate free literature, everybody (including those who run libraries) will enjoy free access to that literature. Free literature means less literature to purchase; less literature to purchase means fewer expenditures from acquisitions budgets. And fewer expenditures from acquisitions budgets means more money for expenditures elsewhere. Hence libraries can, according to this anarcho-syndicalist balderdash, donate those freed monies to their own institution’s press.

In other words, when enough institutions make the leap into free publishing, the savings achieved — the savings realized by no longer having to purchase (now free) publications from University Press X, University Press Y, and University Press Z — will more than offset the costs incurred when libraries contributes resources to support open-access publishing. To put it bluntly (and, I might add, stupidly): when some critical mass of university presses make their publications available to anybody with an Internet connection, the savings realized by libraries will more than offset the expense of running a press themselves.

So what is wrong with this argument? Everything.

First, if it succeeds billions of people now without access to scholarship will, over time, obtain access to new, unusual, unsettling — nay, dangerous — ideas and information with the potential to spawn all manner of confusion and unease. The public — even the educated public beyond the walls of wealthy colleges and universities — cannot handle this stuff. Protect the poor souls!

Second, let’s assume — just for the sake of argument — that universal access to scholarship is a good thing. (I know, I know. Just humor me for a minute.) Even with such a concession, the model is doomed, because it requires leaders. Some institutions must jump first. But no institution will be so foolish. Can you imagine institutions contributing resources to produce publications for other institutions that as yet offer no guarantees of reciprocity?

Well, O.K., Michigan. But Michiganders possess all the impulse- control of wolverines.
Penn State? Sure, but only when addled by football scandals and binge drinking.

National Academies Press? Yes, but chiefly because its members are dumber than a bag of hammers.

Third, will any scholar sully her name by allowing a press — no matter how reputable, how long a track record, how committed to quality editing and peer review — to distribute her work for free? Of course not.

Granted, she will receive no compensation for publishing her article with you. But the impressive price tag you put on her book provides an imprimatur of importance, solidity, and worth. A free publication? Your gut and my gut know that gratuitous goods have no value. Free = worthless. Ask any marketing specialist.

Fourth, nobody need remind the professoriate just how many open-access publications are, shall we say, rather sketchy. Consult the Directory of Open Access Journals (http://www.doaj.org) to peruse a stunning variety of semi-reputable and dodgy titles sprinkled among the worthies that demand rigorous peer review and scrupulous editing.

If we play this right, we can easily tarnish the very notion of open-access by pointing to some embarrassing examples. You know the argument: Toyota once produced a lemon, ergo all Japanese cars are lemons.

Fifth, faculty don’t care whether anybody reads their work. Research indicating that articles in open-access journals enjoy many more readers than articles behind paywalls: couldn’t be more irrelevant. Of absolutely no consequence to academic authors.

And sixth, fear works to our advantage. Gently cultivate the gut-wrenching anxiety of young faculty facing tenure and promotion. Nobody is more uncertain and skittish than an assistant professor planning for D-Day. Milk this for all it’s worth. Remind young faculty how deeply you care about them: your sole concern is their welfare and success, and thus you would be heartbroken if they elected to publish in any journal or with any monograph press that exudes even the faintest odor of novelty. Too great a risk. Anything the least bit unfamiliar is uncertain, and uncertainty is to be avoided like the plague.

Because we know from Camus that plague is a terrible thing.

Which is not to say we want the general public reading philosophy or epidemiology journals.

Your Empathetic Uncle,

Screwtape

Bio

Bryn Geffert is librarian of the college at Amherst College