

status quo". The work of Brembs *et al.* clearly demonstrates how remote from the current system visions on scholarly publishing are already, alarming us to take action for the better.^[9]

Thinking of a future in publishing consisting of open access and public peer review – everyone is thrilled, everything is working. Of course, as it always is in scientific publishing, the next endeavor awaits: Reproducibility of experiments and the “publish or perish” vicious cycle are most likely to be the next construction sites. As usual, final answers and definite truths cannot be provided here. Just one thing remains true: One has to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the current (and always changing) publication strategies and must not trust ratings blindly.

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Publishing in the Humanities – Interview with Jörg Meidenbauer

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The Frankfurt-based Peter Lang GmbH is part of the Peter Lang International Academic Publishing Group, which is domiciled in Berne/Switzerland. The company has been engaged in academic publishing for more than 40 years, focusing primarily on the humanities and social sciences. Some 1,200 works are published in Frankfurt each year in electronic and hard copy format, together with some academic journals. To find out more about the view of publishers on quality, JUnQ editorial board member David Huesmann sat down with Dr. Jörg Meidenbauer – CEO of Peter Lang GmbH – to discuss the role of publishers in the quality assurance process.



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JUnQ: Let us start with a controversial question: Why do we need publishers in times of the world wide web? Can we not just upload all our research ourselves and make it available for everyone?

Meidenbauer: Well, of course everyone can simply upload her or his research onto some server, and at the end of the day we will see if it is then visible for everyone or rather lost in the depths of the internet’s ocean of information. But seriously, I think the role of publishing companies has not changed, even if the environment that they operate in has been changing dramatically. The role of publishers has always been to make content visible, to put it into proper context and to make it accessible. A publishing company operates in five dimensions – and I think this is true for all disciplines:

1. It creates products (different from content), which today means books or journals in printed and electronic forms.
2. It adapts contents, e.g. for databases. This field is growing rapidly, as databases are becoming more and more important in the social sciences and in the humanities.
3. A central task of publishing is quality assurance. A publisher should check the formal quality of a scholarly work, whereas peer experts can deal with the quality of its content. I am a historian by training, but I wrote my dissertation a long time ago. I still am familiar with the methods of the discipline, but I do not know what the current issues are. So I can check if the formal quality of the content is ok, but I

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cannot tell whether the author reflects actual discussions, even when it comes to the topic of my own work. That is why – as a publisher – I have to focus on formal quality.

4. As I said, one of our tasks is to put content into context. This means building up a program that stands for certain disciplines or topics. We do not want to be a platform for just anything (like the internet). In the humanities, series with a specific focus are very important.
5. Marketing is also a big issue: Making content visible in databases, in aggregators' catalogues for booksellers and library systems – especially when it comes to electronic books. And there is also the issue of distribution. In the age of Gutenberg, distribution was separate from marketing. You had advertising for and selling of books. These were completely different processes. When it comes to electronic content, distribution comes closer and closer to marketing. Nowadays, you see content in a database, you click on it to get more information, and with the next click you buy it.

So if the publisher – as an expert for academic communication – takes proper care of all these dimensions, it will be more effective than just uploading something to the internet.

JUnQ: What are quality criteria that you look for in works that you publish?

Meidenbauer: In the humanities, quality is defined by the sustainability of the content, and how sustainable it is only becomes apparent in the course of the scholarly discourse. Life-cycles of academic works in the humanities are quite long – maybe decades – and so it's not easy to have an objective measure of whether content is of high quality or not. Of course you have hints. You can see, for instance, whether the author worked with proper methods, especially when it comes to the more empiric approaches of social sciences. But, as I have stated, a publisher in the humanities, can only check objectively if formal quality is good. That includes language, orthography, citation etc.

JUnQ: Do you look for different criteria in empirical work and in work that is more theoretical, like say philosophy?

Meidenbauer: A philosopher might appear as the prototype of a person sitting in her or his ivory tower, writing just for him- or herself. It is very, very difficult to have an objective measure of whether a philosopher is right or wrong. You could even start by asking what is right or wrong? I think the more it comes to classical humanities, the more difficult it is to state objective criteria for quality. From the humanities' point of view, you will never win a debate on whether you are objective or not. Lots of people would say an objective view on anything in the world simply does not exist – and so there are no objective criteria for quality.

JUnQ: Would you say, things like H-indices or impact factors, that appear to be objective, provide a good way to measure the quality of scientific work?

Meidenbauer: Even in the humanities, everybody knows the stories, appearing at least twice a year, of big fakes published in well-known STM-journals using objective methods. So of course there is a discussion, whether quantitative criteria are suitable or not. I personally think that quantifying methods can be proper approaches to evaluate quality – but they cannot guarantee it.

JUnQ: So why are these criteria used anyway? What makes them so appealing?

Meidenbauer: What makes them attractive is that numbers can very easily be linked e.g. to funding money as well as career development.

JUnQ: If you could decide, what criteria would you choose to measure quality in science?

Meidenbauer: It depends on the discipline, of course. Generally speaking, there are indicators like the observance of all relevant material or literature. Does the author know the relevant literature and does he take it into account? Other indicators are methods. And you can, of course, always look at the conclusiveness of the argument, is it logical or not? But, as you can see, with every indicator I mention, a new field for discussion opens up.

JUnQ: Peer-review is often used to assess the quality of scientific work. What does peer-review mean? Does Peer-Review mean the same thing to everyone?

Meidenbauer: To start with your second question: certainly not! I think what is important when it comes to peer-review is that there is no common tradition of peer-reviewing, neither in a cultural context, nor in the context of a certain discipline. We had very intense discussions about this within our publishing company as well as with external series editors. In a certain phase of this discussion I have collected different forms of peer-review and I found more than ten. There is open, blind (single-blind, double-blind), internal or external peer-review only to state a few. In a proper sense, "peer-review" can mean any way of examination by colleagues.

JUnQ: How independent are the reviewers in this peer-review process?

Meidenbauer: It is often stated, at least in the humanities, that the fields of research are so specialized that those three to four people who deal intensively with a subject simply cannot peer-review each other blindly. They even recognize each others style of writing. One might think of possibilities where independence is compromised, for example when the reviewer knows the author and the author is on a board that

decides about funding the reviewers' research. It would be very difficult to stay objective under these circumstances. So I would very clearly state that you get indicators for quality, but no guarantee for absolute truth.

JUnQ: When confronted with over interpreting data, scientists often claim that editors pressured them to make their results more interesting.³ Can a publisher be very successful when he is only looking at quality or is there also a need for exciting and controversial content?

Meidenbauer: In the humanities, with very long life cycles, you never know exactly what is on the way out, or what will be in the future, because you simply do not know the questions of future scholars. That is the first thing. Another aspect: Doing your research you might find out that you focused on questions that cannot be answered satisfactory at all. An historian, for example, might have an idea, go into the archives to look at different sources and after some time find out that there are no sources on the subject he intended to work on. Usually, he would not publish that fact; he adjusts his question a bit to make it worth dealing with. So the issue here is: Is there a worthwhile question to answer or not? If the answer is negative, and you did not put too much time into finding out, no problem will arise. But if you invested a lot of work and money into your research, just to find out that there is nothing there, you will be asked: What did you spend your time and money on? Efforts to avoid such discussions might turn the interpretation of results in a certain direction, but this is not that common in the humanities. Naturally, everybody involved in the scientific process prefers results that are worth disseminating – researchers like to enhance their reputations, and publishers need to boost book sales. But I do not think publishers in the humanities put a lot of pressure on their

authors.

JUnQ: Why do you think a lot of cases of plagiarism were found in the theses of German politicians in the last years? Do you think the cases of plagiarism really increase or are they just easier to find nowadays?

Meidenbauer: I think this is a political issue in itself. It is quite interesting, that when plagiarism became an issue of public debate, a very prominent political figure was involved first,⁴ and then a number of other important politicians had to step down. When you think of the latest findings,⁵ it was not such a big deal anymore. So, while I think that there is misuse of the whole system of academic titles, which has much to do with the reputation coming along with an academic title in Germany, I also think that the time of scandals in this area might well be over. Topics of political scandals have always been changing, and it seems now everybody is waiting for a new big issue. In the end I would say that today's possibilities were not available at the time these works were published, and that might put things into a different perspective. All in all, the plagiarism scandal had a lot of impact, since there is a stronger focus on plagiarism now and more people are aware of the problem.

JUnQ: So there might actually be something good coming out of this scandal for the publishing industry?

Meidenbauer: Yes, and for academia, because everybody is getting more aware of the potential for fraud that the system offers. And I think that is a good outcome, even if not all of these scandals or pseudo-scandals were helpful.

—David Huesmann

³<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/342/6154/68.full>

⁴Editorial note: Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, former German Minister of Defense, stepped down in 2011 after plagiarism in his doctoral thesis became known.

⁵Editorial note: Frank-Walter Steinmeier (former German Vice Chancellor) and Norbert Lammert (Chairman of the Bundestag (Lower House of German Parliament)) were both accused of plagiarism in their dissertations, but were found not guilty by their universities.