

“Thank you for your kind permission to reprint.” NOT.

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Abstract

Why would anyone thank a publisher for his permission to reprint an article as part of a dissertation, instead of thanking the publisher for printing it in the first place?



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ABSTRACT

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When you finally submit your PhD thesis, you hope that parts of it will already have appeared in various academic journals. In which case it is considered quite polite (possibly even obligatory) to thank the publishers of those journals for their “kind permission” to reprint the article as a chapter of your dissertation. This is an extremely strange thing to do. You don’t want to thank them for permission to publish your own research in your own dissertation. You want to thank them for publishing part of your research in their journal. This might sound like a semantic point, but the difference is really crucial. After all, thanking them for permission to reprint means that you think they have to give you permission. To publish your own work.

Why is it so strange to thank the publisher? Because it is *your* research. They are *your* ideas, arguments and conclusions. It is *your* text, the product of *your* creative thinking, *your* months of academic labour. Something that you have, usually, revised again and again for publication in *your* dissertation. How is it ever possible to think that part of this product now belongs to the publishers of a journal? Whom you have to thank for their kind permission to publish it again in the thesis for which it was originally written? What kind of alienation is needed to make this act of prostitution seem like nothing more than simple politeness?

I don’t have the answer to this question, but my guess would be that it has at least something to do with the way the scientific enterprise is set up. Science is not, and perhaps never was, the search for knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Instead, science has become just another line of business. The output of which has to be ‘sold’ to other scientists. And publishing firms own the capital needed to affect this sale: journals and their websites.

But academics are not factory workers. Journal publishers merely provide the channels through which we can publish our research. So why should we hand over the copyrights over our labour to these printing houses? And thank them humbly for allowing us to reprint our own work elsewhere?

From a business point of view, perhaps this makes sense. Publishers have to make a profit in order for their journals to continue to exist. If everyone was free to distribute copies of their articles via other channels, why would anyone still subscribe to a journal? From an academic point of view, however, handing over copyrights to a business is the strangest thing to do. It implies that you think of yourself as part of a commercial production chain, where you ‘sell’ (without even getting any money for it) your products to the next level in the chain, that then becomes the owner of this product. Which is most empathically not what journals were intended for. A journal is a way to present your research to the

wider academic community, hoping that someone out there might benefit from it. If there are other ways to present your research, be it in blogs, at conferences, in classes you teach or in your dissertation, there is absolutely no reason why you should not be allowed to do so.

Open access publishing might or might not be the revolution in academic practice that its proponents hold it to be. It does, however, at least ask the right question: who owns the outcome of your research? To which our answer should be 'I do'. So if you want to thank publishers, do not thank them for their permission to reprint, but for printing your research in the first place.

This blog originally appeared on the blogging site of VU University's Graduate School of Social Sciences: <http://socializingsciencevu.com/2014/05/28/permission-to-reprint/>. The author thanks both The Winnower and Socializing Science for publishing his thoughts on this matter.