

Running Head: ETDs: SURVEY OF EDITORS & PUBLISHERS

**Electronic Theses & Dissertations:
A Survey of Editors & Publishers**

By

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Abstract

Approximately 200 editors and publishers of established academic journals were invited to respond to an online survey exploring issues surrounding the question of prior publication in an electronic environment, with particular emphasis on electronic theses and dissertations. With a response rate of 25%, certain conclusions and patterns could be discerned. At the same time, a comprehensive review was done of the policies on prior publication in the same 200 journals. The review yielded evidence of contradictory opinion on the question of electronic dissemination and how it may or may not contribute to the designation of research as “published”. The differences in opinion varied by discipline, and were often based on specific criteria, which will be reviewed.

Electronic Theses & Dissertations: A Survey of Editors & Publishers

The topic today reviews the results of an online survey conducted during the fall of 1999, which had as its focus the question of prior publication in an electronic environment for scholarly communication, with specific emphasis on electronic theses and dissertations.

While attending the *2nd Symposium on Electronic Theses and Dissertations* in May of 1999 in Virginia, it became evident that several issues or 'controversies' had been identified in the discussions surrounding electronic publishing in general, and electronic dissertations specifically.

Some of the issues included:

- the question of long-term preservation and transfer of content to future formats;
- concerns about how electronic access might facilitate plagiarism;
- the need for training graduate students to use the technology;
- implementation strategies needed to launch a project at academic institutions.

One of the most important issues identified pertained to the level of awareness and acceptance of electronically distributed dissertations by the scholarly publishing community, and how the members of this community were responding to the question of prior publication in cases where derivative articles or portions of electronic dissertations were being submitted for publication to scholarly journals.

At Virginia Polytechnic Institute, where it was mandated in 1997 that dissertations be submitted in electronic format, concerns were expressed by both faculty and doctoral students. Their concerns pertained to the wide dissemination of doctoral research through the Web, and potential effects this might have on future publication opportunities. In response to these concerns, Virginia Tech offered students several options for restricting access to their work. Students could chose to offer full access to their electronic dissertation without any restrictions; restrict access to the campus community; restrict access for a specific period of time; or to

restrict access entirely, which was desirable in specific cases such as with patent applications pending.

However, while a range of options for restriction was made available, the wide unfettered accessibility of ETDs remained the preferred option by the founders of the project, in keeping with the mission of the National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) based at Virginia Tech. Edward Fox, one of the principle investigators of the NDLTD Project Team, contacted several publishers in 1997 to solicit support for electronic dissertations and to request policy statements on the question of prior publication in the case of ETDs. Several of the publishers that were contacted supported the initiative, as evidenced by the [letters](#) received from the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), the Entomological Society of America and Elsevier Science. There still seemed to be hesitation by doctoral students however [Table 1] as seen in the results of several surveys done on the Virginia Tech Campus between 1997 - 1999.

Table 1

Survey Results from Virginia Tech regarding Access to ETDs, 1997-1999

Level of Electronic Access

- 48% of the students chose to give their ETDs had unrestricted access
- 33% of the students chose to restrict access to their university community
- 19% of the students made their ETDs inaccessible to all

Graduate Student Survey

- 78% of students decided to limit access to their ETDs on advice of Faculty
- 13% of students decided to limit access to their ETDs on advice of Publishers

Alumni Survey

- 43% of alumni successfully published derivative works
 - 100% of alumni found no resistance from publishers
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According to the results of a survey of Alumni it seemed the *perception* that publishers would reject submissions derived from ETDs was stronger than the reality. But perception is everything where there is little hard evidence from which to draw.

I felt that by soliciting responses directly from the scholarly publishing community by means of a survey, we might begin to build a picture of where opinion was leaning with the respect to widely disseminated ETDs and to the question of “prior publication”. The broader question of what it means to publish in the electronic scholarly environment is tantamount here.

The approach in choosing which journal editors and publishers to contact reflects certain parameters. Because this issues surrounding e-publishing were more relevant in the periodical publishing cycle, the survey was limited to publishers and editors of academic scholarly journals. It also seemed important to have representation from the for-profit and non-profit sectors, as well as to include the publications committees of scholarly societies. A pre-survey review of the editorial statements in dozens of journals revealed that editorial policy was set at either the level of the Publisher or Society, or at the editorial level for a specific journal. There seemed to be no significant pattern that I could discern here, but it became apparent that examples of both should be represented in the audience to be polled.

Table 2

Selected Publishers included in the ETD Survey Population

Academic Press	Elsevier Science
American Chemical Society	IEEE
American Psychological Association	Institute of Physics Journals
American Society for Microbiology	FASEB Societies
American Society of Mechanical Engineers	MCB University Press
Blackwell Science	University of Chicago Press
Cambridge University Press	Wiley & Sons

Information was drawn from journal homepages on the Web, where parallel electronic versions of established scholarly journals have proliferated in recent years. Individual journals were chosen by first identifying large academic publishers or scholarly societies, and viewing the homepages for the journals which they published. Journal homepages on the Web typically offer the same information as their print counterparts including a listing of the members of the Editorial Board, and essential for this review, the "Instructions to Authors" or "Instructions to Contributors" statement.

The content of the final database created as a result of this review contained information drawn from 200 unique journals. Included in this database were the names of Editors, Publishers and Publication Committee Chairs, their email addresses, and relevant excerpts from the "Instruction to Authors" pages where specific reference is made to prior publication. In some cases, separate Editorial Policy statements proved relevant to the question at hand.

Before turning our attention to the survey itself, it seems worthwhile to review the information pertaining to *prior publication* which was gathered from the 200 journal homepages in preparation for administering the survey. Specific policy statements which include reference to ETDs have only appeared in a handful of cases, so it becomes necessary to track the policies which are emerging with respect to electronically available research and the question of prior publication, for application to the specific case of ETDs.

It is my argument that we can track the development of policy in the scholarly publishing community as it grapples with a coherent response to electronically available research and prior publication, and extrapolate the path of these developing policies to include electronic dissertations – a unique but significant genre in scholarly publishing.

In reviewing the policies stated under the "Instructions to Authors" pages and elsewhere on the journal web-sites, the statements regarding manuscript acceptance and prior publication seem to fall easily into one of four specific categories. By far the largest number of journals gave the familiar and standard statement, an example of which would read *Manuscripts are accepted for review with the understanding that the same work has not been published, that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, and that its submission for publication has been approved by all of the listed authors and by the institutions where the work was carried out.* With only slight textual variations among them, this was the most prevalent statement found regarding *prior publication* in 49% of the 200 journals selected [table 3].

Table 3.

Review of States Policies on *Prior Publication* drawn from Journal Homepages

15% - no specific statement on prior or simultaneous publication
 49% - standard statement
 21% - standard statement with specific exceptions noted
 15% - standard statement with specific inclusions outlined and described

Surprisingly, 15% of the journals had no specific reference to prior or simultaneous publication. However, 21% of the journals gave the standard policy with certain exceptions noted, often in reference to electronic documents. There were several statements that specifically allowed posting on personal websites or an internal institutional website. In several cases, policies required that if on the web, the research must be labeled a "draft" and subsequently be removed upon acceptance for publication in the journal. Finally, 15% of the policies restrictions based on prior publication were extended to specifically include the submission of research that may have been previously available in electronic format.

Although in each case *prior publication* in electronic format was the official restriction in this last group, it seemed that the authors of the policies were casting about in their attempt to define what it meant to be 'published' in electronic format. At least nine distinct definitions of 'electronic publication' could be identified in this group of policy statements. In one case the definition identified "*material in a public database system*" which speaks to potential wide accessibility. In another case, the simple "*electronic posting of a manuscript*" is identified as a barrier for submission on the grounds of prior publication. The lack of consensus in attempting to define what it means to "publish" in an electronic environment is worth noting. If the scholarly publishing community has difficulty defining what it means to publish in electronic format, how can it hope to adequately deal with all the issues that arise from communicating in this new medium?

In an important article on scholarly electronic publishing (Kling, & McKim, 1999) Rob Kling of the Center for Social Informatics at Indiana University points to the lack of consensus in defining electronic publishing, in particular electronic journals. He attempts to bring some clarity to the effort by defining and classifying the different varieties of electronically available research in the scholarly publishing in three categories:

1. Hybrid Paper-Electronic Journal: a package of peer-reviewed articles available through electronic channels, but whose primary distribution channels are paper-based (e.g. *Journal of Neuroscience*; *The Journal of Biological Chemistry*)
2. Electronic Working Articles: electronic scholarly communications that are not peer reviewed and are given a variety of labels: e-prints, working papers, pre-prints, e-magazines (e.g. *Los Alamos National Library Pre-print Archive*)
3. Electronic Journals: defined as a package of articles that is distributed to most or all of its subscribers in electronic form. Often, no parallel paper format exists. (e.g. *Psychology*; *Journal of the Association for Information Science*)

Kling notes that in the current discussion of electronic scholarly publishing these types of distinctions among electronically available research articles are rarely made. This leads Kling to the conclusion that "reports of the exponential growth of e-journals really mean exponential growth of the hybrid Paper-Electronic or PE journals." And while the hybrid Paper-Electronic journals "bring their reputations [and] review practices that they established in the paper world and some of their readership to their electronic versions", true electronic journals, those that have no paper parallel, "face more daunting problems in establishing their legitimacy, and risk a higher failure rate" (p. 6).

Martin Blume, editor for the American Physical Society, tackled this question in a presentation at a workshop on developing practices and standards for e-publishing in science (Bloom, 1998). In his presentation he reflects beliefs commonly held by the Physics community, namely that the dissemination of research, either in print or electronically will not preclude its acceptance for review and eventual publication.

Blume distinguishes between that which is published (small p) as a pre-print, non-refereed manuscript and that which is Published (large P) as an article which has undergone the peer-review process. The distinction is a crucial one in defining what it means to be *published*. However, as we shall see, peer-review is not the only criteria by which some publishers and editors define prior publication in the case of electronically available research. In many cases other criteria seem to be more dominant in determining a status of prior publication— thus we can detect a lack of consensus in the scholarly publishing community, which is where we begin in examining the question.

The Survey:

An identical email 'cover letter' was sent to either the Editor, Publisher or Publications Committee Chair for all 200 identified journal titles, introducing the topic and requesting their participation in the online survey, which they could easily access through a hypertext link embedded in the email message . The survey was designed using a template located on a server at Virginia Tech, and with the generous assistance of Tony Atkins, the Technical Director of the Digital Library and Archives at Virginia Tech. The response rate reached 25% with 46 actual surveys being completed [table 4]. There were also eight personal email responses to the general question as it was presented in the cover letter by people who wished to comment but chose not to complete the survey.

Table 4.

Summary of Responses

Editors and publishers were contacted by email, given a brief background on ETDs and the NDLTD, and were asked to participate in the online survey titled “Electronic Theses & Dissertations: A Survey of Editors and Publishers” available at

<http://lumiere.lib.vt.edu/surveys/>

- 46 responded by completing the survey
 - 8 offered opinions by email, without completing the survey
 - response rate: 27%
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For the purposes of this presentation, the survey responses will be viewed through an imposed grouping by broad subject disciplines: Physical Sciences; Life Sciences; Medical Sciences and Social Sciences. This is to acknowledge the significant variations in the scholarly publishing cycles of different academic disciplines. For the purpose of informing doctoral students and their advisors, a view of how the issues surrounding electronic publishing are being

addressed in their specific disciplines is necessary. Policy development with respect to electronic publishing will be shaped by the parameters unique to each discipline. The first question was designed to gather information about the respondents and the journals with which they were affiliated [table 5].

Table 5.

Survey - Characteristics of Survey Respondents

-
- 95% Editor, Associate Editor, or Editorial Director
 - 4% Publisher
 - 1% Publications Chair or Officer

 - 73% Not-for-profit publications
 - 27% For-profit publications

 - 39% Physical Sciences [including: Physics, Chemistry, Engineering, Astronomy]
 - 34% Life Sciences [including: Biology, Biochemistry, Biophysics, Genetics, Mycology]
 - 10% Medical Sciences [including: Physiology, Neurology, Gastroenterology, Immunology]
 - 9% Social Sciences [including: Psychology, Business, Marketing]
-

Respondents were then asked about the editorial policies of their journals, with specific reference to policies on prior publication. While in most cases there were stated policies on prior publication, far fewer had made explicit reference to research which may have been accessible on the Web. [table 6].

Table 6.

Survey - Policies on *Prior Publication*

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- 94% of respondents stated that the journal(s) had a policy on *prior publication* explicitly stated in 'Guidelines to Contributors' pages.
 - 68% of respondents stated that the published policies **did not** specifically refer to work which was posted on the Web or otherwise made electronically available
-

Review of responses

A specific question on identifying what constitutes “prior publication” in electronic format listed several possible responses [table 7]. Respondents were instructed to identify as many choices as were applicable according to the editorial practices of their journals. Included in the question was the opportunity to identify 'other' forms of electronic publications, with a text-box for comments.

Table 7.

Question: What constitutes *Prior Publication*?

Q. 3A

According to the editorial policy of the journal(s), which of the following would constitute ‘prior publication’ in electronic format? Please indicate by selecting as many as are applicable.

- Online thesis or dissertation widely available through a web-based archive
 - Online thesis or dissertation with access limited to campus or institution
 - Research results available through a pre-print server (i.e. Los Alamos)
 - Research results available on a personal homepage prior to peer-review
 - Conference proceedings available through a web-based server
 - All of the above
 - None of the above
 - Other – please elaborate
-

Responses to Question 3A

Based on the knowledge that prior publication is the most common grounds for the rejection of a manuscript submitted for publication, the least restrictive policies in identifying examples of prepublication in electronic format are found in the Physical Science journals. Only 5% of the policies in Physical Science journals would define an online thesis or dissertation as an example of prior publication[table 8]. In each of the other three discipline groups identified, a full 25% of the respondents identified widely available online theses and dissertations as works of prior

publication, therefore excluding them from possible submission for publication in an established scholarly journal.

Table 8.

Responses: Question 3A [grouped by Broad Subject Discipline]*

Physical Sciences:

- 55% - None of the above
- 16% - Conference proceedings via web-based server
- 11% - Research results available through a pre-print server
- 5% - Online thesis or dissertation widely available through a web-based server

Life Sciences

- 63% - Conference proceedings via web-based server
- 56% - Research results available through a pre-print server
- 25% - Online thesis or dissertation widely available through a web-based server
- 18% - Research results available via personal homepage prior to peer-review

Medical Sciences

- 25% - All of the above
- 25% - Online thesis or dissertation widely available through a web-based server
- 25% - Conference proceedings via web-based server

Social Sciences

- 50% - Research results via a pre-print server
 - 50% - Research results via personal homepage prior to peer-review
 - 25% - Online thesis or dissertation widely distributed through a web-based server
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*Respondents were asked to identify as many of the possible answers as they felt were appropriate to the question. Therefore, percentages reflect responses, not individual respondents.

Respondents were given the opportunity to offer their opinions in a free-text format, and many of the comments proved revealing in helping to understanding what criteria the respondents were using to define “prior publication” in an electronic environment. [Table 9]. In reviewing the responses to the survey question along with the textual comments offered, it became evident that four distinct criteria were being used in defining what constituted previously published material in the electronic environment.

Table 9.

Criteria identified - “prior publication” in electronic format

Criterion	Comment
1. Peer review	<i>“Anything that has been peer-reviewed prior to publication”</i>
2. Level of access / dissemination	<i>“ I would consider web-based publishing to be publishing since it is ‘broadcasting’ information.”</i>
3. Lack of content revision	<i>“ If [any electronically available material] is essentially identical to the manuscript submitted, it would represent prior publication”</i>
4. Stability / Legitimacy of electronic format	<i>“We do not recognize web-based publication as formerly published. Web-based publication does not constitute a stable form of publication that is citable as a reference”</i>

A summary of the responses to Question 3A, grouped by discipline [Table 10], explain that although policies in Physical Science journals seem the least restrictive in terms of defining what is “published” in the electronic environment, the primary criteria used to do so is peer-review. In the life sciences and medical sciences, the dominant criteria for defining “publication” seemed to be tied to the level of accessibility or exposure the material may have received as a result of being posted on the Web.

In the social sciences, at least half of the responses to the question indicated that research available through either a pre-print server or a personal webpage posting would be considered “published” for the purpose of identifying “prior publication”. The issue of content revision was raised in the comments for this discipline however. The point was made that as long as manuscript submissions were “derived from” but not identical to electronically posted materials (dissertations or otherwise) then they would be acceptable.

Table 10Summary of Responses to Q.3A grouped by Discipline

Physical Sciences:	Essentially non-restrictive with respect to the question of prior publication in electronic format. <i>Peer-review</i> was most frequently cited element in defining ‘published’ research.
Life Sciences:	Emphasis was primarily on the <i>level of access / dissemination</i> of an electronic document in determining whether it constituted prior publication. Followed closely by <i>peer-review</i> as an essential criteria.
Medical Sciences:	As with Life Sciences, <i>level of access or dissemination</i> was the most frequently cited criteria for defining prior publication. Followed by <i>peer-review</i> as an important criteria.
Social Sciences:	Emphasis of responses was on <i>revision of content</i> ; that submissions which may have been available electronically be “derived” from, but not a duplication of, material available online. Simple availability of work on the Web is, for some in this group, an example of prior publication.

In another question, the respondents were asked more pointedly about the admissibility of content from web-based dissertations for submission to their respective journals [Table 11].

Respondents were asked to base their answers on existing policies of the journals for which they acted as editors or publishers in considering the question .

Table 11.

Question: When is submission from web-based dissertation acceptable?Q. 5A

According to the editorial policy governing the journal(s) identified, under which of the following circumstances would a manuscript from a WEB-based dissertation be considered for publication?

- ◆ Under no circumstances. Manuscripts derived from dissertations would be considered previously published, regardless of format.
- ◆ Under no circumstances. Research made widely available via the WWW would be considered previously published.

- ◆ Only if the online dissertation has access limited to the campus or institution where it was completed.
- ◆ Only if the contents and conclusions in the manuscript were substantially different from the dissertation.
- ◆ Manuscripts derived from web-based dissertations would be considered on an individual basis.
- ◆ Manuscripts derived from web-based dissertations would be welcomed for submission
- ◆ Other – Please elaborate

By combining the two most dominant responses in each broad discipline grouping, we can see that in 77% of the cases, respondents representing the physical sciences would either welcome manuscripts derived from web-based dissertations, or would at least consider such manuscripts on an individual basis. [Table 12] In the life sciences, the combined percentage of the same two responses is 67%; in the medical sciences it is 50%; and in the social sciences, a full 75% of the respondents would welcome manuscripts derived from web-based dissertations without prejudice.

Table 12

Responses: Question 5A. When is a submission acceptable?

Physical Sciences:

- ◆ 61% - Manuscripts ... would be welcomed for submission
- ◆ 16% - Manuscripts ... would be considered on an individual basis
- ◆ 5% - Only if the online dissertation has access limited to the campus or institution

Life Sciences

- ◆ 37% - Manuscripts ... would be considered on an individual basis
- ◆ 31% - Manuscripts ... would be welcomed for submission
- ◆ 12% - Under no circumstances. Manuscripts derived from dissertations would be considered previously published, regardless of format.
- ◆ 12% - Only if the online dissertation has access limited to campus or institution
- ◆ 12% - Other – “presently being evaluated”; “policy not set”

Medical Sciences

- ◆ 25% - Manuscripts ... would be considered on an individual basis
- ◆ 25% - Manuscripts ... would be welcomed for submission
- ◆ 25% - Only if the online dissertation has access limited to campus or institution
- ◆ 25% - Other – “If information is fixed, and thus citable, it is considered prior publication”

Social Sciences

- ◆ 75% - Manuscripts ... would be welcomed for submission
- ◆ 25% - Other – “policy has not yet been set on this issue”

These results should prove encouraging for many doctoral students and their advisors on the issue of manuscript submission subsequent to web-posting. As members of the various academic disciplines begin discussing the issues around electronic publishing and its application to the scholarly communication process in their communities, it is expected that the trends toward acceptance and adoption will increase.

Kling (1999) is quick to point out however, that the current discussion about electronic publishing is not going far enough in acknowledging the disciplinary differences in scholarly communication.

Unfortunately, few analyses of scholarly e-publishing explicitly acknowledge the differences in communication practices from field to field. Terms like “being published” are treated as categorical. However, the actual communicative practices that constitute publishing vary from one field to another. (p. 2, Preprint)

There are important distinctions that can and should be made when comparing different disciplines and the communication practices they employ (Kling & McKim, 2000).

Several comments offered by the respondents (to whom with anonymity was assured) are reveal the reasoning behind the policies they endorse as editors and publishers on the issues surrounding ETDs and prior publication policies:

"I view theses as a completely different form of publication. We expect that the results will eventually be published and do not discriminate against the student because the thesis is widely available."

"We believe that distribution as a dissertation is sufficiently different from a publication in a refereed journal as to not be of concern."

"I would see electronic availability of a thesis as only equivalent to what has long been available through microfilm and as not constituting prior publication."

" anyone can post anything they want on the web without compromising the acceptability of that material for subsequent submission to the *Journal*, UNLESS posting on the site requires that the material pass through some kind of peer-review. In this case, it becomes no longer acceptable for submission."

" Communication in science and medicine will not be well served by standing in the way of publication in many versions, and the *Journal* is willing to consider for publication e-prints that have been posted on websites so long as their status as e-prints is clear. In the meantime, authors, editors and publishers have more work to do to make the status of articles entirely clear. This is the age of transparency rather than paternalism"

Conclusion

The policies of many journals with regard to internet posting and prior publication are still in flux, as evidenced by some of the responses to this survey. When pressed to define prior publication in the electronic medium, many publishers and editors naturally draw from standard practice in print publishing and identify peer-review as the one element which determines the publication status of written research. Regardless of format, it was indicated, if a paper had been refereed, then it was considered previously published. This criterion was not dominant in all cases however. In the life sciences and medical sciences, a work which had been made widely available through posting on a website was in some cases considered to have been "published" and therefore subject to possible rejection for publication in an established print journal on this basis.

The hope that a consensus will be reached on a definition of what it means to publish in the electronic environment may not be a realistic one. Nor should it be, some would argue.

Enthusiasts of the electronic publishing movement may be ignoring important issues by proposing that a single model for electronic scholarly publishing is appropriate for all scholarly communities. (Kling, 1999. p 7).

If the scholarly publishing community chooses to focus on peer-review as the defining criterion in determining whether a document is “published” in the electronic environment, then policy may develop more rapidly. It is the lack of consensus in defining what it means to publish that seems to be, at least in part, confusing the issue. The confusion is understandable however. Anyone with access to the technology can put anything “out there” and say it is published. However, Kling makes a valid observation when he notes that "getting a document on the Internet read by the right audience takes work. Academics, like most professionals, are busy people, and many do not go out of their way to comb the Internet for possibly relevant material.” The author states further that “posting a document in an unrestricted area on the Web *potentially* expands its readership to millions of people for little or no marginal cost. But a document’s availability on the Web does not mean that it will be read by the relevant community.” (Kling, 1999. p11, preprint).

If the scholarly publishing community’s primary concern is, as it should be, one of quality control rather than competition for commercial success, then contributors and editors alike should be working to develop publishing models which would incorporate mechanisms to ensure quality control on the Web in ways that parallel what peer-review has done for so long in the print world of scholarly communication.

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