

Privashing, Publishing and the search for the right word for publication
<http://tinyurl.com/pwdd554>

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After yet another conference talking to my colleagues about digital scholarship, I have come to the conclusion that we need to modify our vocabulary when we talk about what does and does not constitute a publication. I came up with the hideous neologism “privashing” to distinguish what we do when we allow commercial publishers to sell access to the academic work that we have produced (and I was a bit appalled to find out that others had already come up with this same term with similar meanings).¹ I am not at all happy with this term but I simply do not think that I can honestly use the terms “publishing” or “publication” to describe the traditional practice of handing scholarly work over to commercial entities. Ugly as it may be to use a term such as privashing, that ugliness pales against the ugliness of using the term publishing to describe the habit of letting commercial entities privatize scholarly work -- especially in countries where, as is the case in Germany, state funding pays our salaries.

Publication and publishing are terms with contextual meaning and, at least in my view, they imply that we have placed our ideas in that medium which most effectively renders those ideas public. Publication and publishing have -- or should have -- a prescriptive dimension and imply that we have made our work as public as possible. What counted as publication changed when we shifted to print culture and it has changed now as we adapt to a digital world.

When I became an Assistant Professor thirty years ago, in 1985, publication and publishing clearly implied handing over your work to some commercial entity that would then supervise the mechanics of printing and distribution. We handed over our rights because those rights had very little meaning. Someone had to print the damned book and distribute it to a network of libraries (and perhaps a handful of individuals) and few of us had the energy to found a press to publish our work, as Edward Tufte famously did for his foundational book on the *Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (originally published in 1983).²

¹ E.g., <http://www.identitytheory.com/seymour-glass-says-good-night/>.

² http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/books_vdqi

By the time I published my first book a few years later, publishers had already begun to demand that scholars supervise the typesetting themselves and, in so doing, cut themselves off almost entirely from the production of content. But there was no World Wide Web (what would become the Internet still only connected a handful of research institutions) and it would be years before the first prototype would emerge for the contemporary incunabular PDF format. We were, of course, already working with CD ROM technology and, even if we never moved beyond these lightweight plastic disks, it was clear that we would be able to distribute hundreds, if not thousands, of books very inexpensively on a single medium (even if that meant distributing TROFF or TeX source texts for distributed printing). But that day had not yet come. Publishing involved commercial firms that sold printed books to cover the costs of production and distribution.

But allowing commercial publishers to sell academic work no longer constitutes the best mechanism for disseminating academic content. Now I think that we need to decide how we use the term publishing and publication. I personally think that we should reserve these terms for works that are available under appropriate open licenses. We need to use some other term if we wish to describe this traditional and now suboptimal, if not destructively outmoded, form of distribution.

A simpler solution might be to use some established term to re-categorize commercialized distribution. We could simply say that we are privatizing or even commercializing our work, thus working with existing words and simply articulating new word senses. But, even if we use a term such as privatize or commercialize, what noun do we use instead of “publications”? Perhaps we could speak of someone’s privatizations or commercializations rather than publications. But if privatizing is a neologism and, to my ear, a harsh and ugly neologism, then that ugliness is not necessarily a bad thing, because allowing commercial publishers to cut our work off from society as a whole seems to me to have evolved from the best compromise available to a rather ugly practice.