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# Electronic Theses and Dissertations as Prior Publications: What the Editors Say

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## **Electronic Theses and Dissertations as *Prior Publications*: What the Editors Say**

### **Background**

Virginia Tech first began requiring all graduate students to submit electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs) in 1997. In January of that year, Virginia Tech stopped accepting paper copies of these documents and, with few exceptions, has since required electronic submission. Access to this collection, which numbered nearly 4000 documents at the end of 2001, is available via the Internet at <http://scholar.vt.edu>. Students and members of their Research Advisory Committee determine the level of access to the ETDs; the four levels of access range from worldwide access to the entire document to securing the entire work with no access allowed to any part of the document.

Implementation of this new policy came after 10 years of discussion, problem-solving and scenario planning, all in an attempt to provide the University with as many answers as possible to the questions that were sure to arise. However, one question difficult if not impossible to address was the impact the ETD policy would have on scholarly publishing. How would publishers view this new method of sharing the result of scholarship and research?

### **Surveys to determine policies**

A component of the discussion regarding impact on publishability is whether or not publishers view ETDs as *prior publications*. In 1999, Joan Dalton at the University of Windsor (Ontario, Canada) contacted 200 publishers and determined that there is more a perception of a problem than an actual problem. Building on this work, an additional 141 editors and publishers were contacted in January 2001 and asked the same kinds of questions that Dalton had asked.<sup>1</sup> The results of this second survey, reported at the ETD 2001 conference,<sup>2</sup> support Dalton's findings. But the results of the second survey also raise questions about the increasing awareness of ETDs and what may lie in store for scholars attempting to publish works based on ETDs.

Results of Dalton's survey, which was completed in 1999 and reported at the ETD 2000 conference, can be seen at <http://lumiere.lib.vt.edu/surveys/>. Her process was to review available publication policies for 200 journals, the focus being on titles that are largely scientific in nature. She followed this review with emails to individuals whom she had identified as responsible for publication policies; they were asked to

complete a short online survey about their view of whether or not ETDs would be considered previously published according to their publication guidelines.

What Dalton discovered was that 94% of her respondents stated that the journal had a policy on *prior publication* explicitly stated in Guidelines to Contributors, but that 68% of respondents stated that these policies did NOT specifically refer to works that were posted on the web or made available electronically. The response rate to the survey was low, with only 29% of those contacted responding by either completing the survey or replying to the survey request with email comments about their publication policies. Dalton's primary conclusion from this study was that there was "more a perception of a problem than an actual problem."

A second study was completed in spring 2001. Faculty and students in Virginia Tech's interdisciplinary Science and Technology Studies (STS) graduate program had expressed concern about the impact ETDs would have on publishing opportunities for themselves and their students. They identified 133 journals, 18 academic presses, and 9 commercial presses as entities where they were most likely to submit articles for publication. The majority of the journals were academic, but the faculty also included such popular titles as *Harper's Magazine*, *The Nation*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Wired Magazine*.

The first part of the project was to identify an electronic means for contacting these entities. This involved searching of both electronic and paper resources; as a result, 10 journals and 2 presses were dropped from the list when they could not be identified from the information supplied, or had ceased publication. At the same time, two commercial presses were added to the list when a connection became apparent between several journal titles and those presses, making their absence from the initial list appear to be an oversight.

The final list of 148 contacts – entities where an email contact could be identified – included 121 journal titles, 18 academic presses, and 9 commercial presses. Of those contacted, 7 emails were returned as undeliverable, resulting in 141 entities being contacted and asked to complete a survey. The instrument used was basically the same used by Dalton, with a few minor modifications to accommodate the difference in audience being contacted. (Dalton had contacted only journal editors, whereas the second survey also included editors for book-publishing entities.)

Response to the second survey was disappointing at 31%. However, there were an additional 36 email responses from people who chose not to complete the survey but instead to make general comments about whether an electronically published thesis or dissertation would constitute a *prior publication* for their journal or publishing house.

### Findings from the 2001 survey

Details of the survey results are, like those from Dalton’s survey, available at <http://lumiere.lib.vt.edu/surveys/>.<sup>1</sup> Among the more interesting findings were that 93% said they had a policy on *prior publication* and simultaneous submission for all or some cases. However, 72% said that the policy did not specifically refer to works that may have been made electronically accessible on the Web.

Answers to Question 5 of the survey provide the clearest view of the thinking of this population regarding ETDs as *prior publications*. The question asked was: “Initiatives to make theses and dissertations accessible through Web-based archives are receiving growing support. It is common practice to set the level of accessibility according to the wishes of the doctoral candidate, who may have concerns about subsequent publication opportunities. According to the editorial policy governing the enterprise(s) identified, under what circumstances would a manuscript derived from a Web-based dissertation be considered for publication?”

29%	Manuscripts derived from Web-based dissertations are considered on an individual basis.
0%	Only if the online dissertation has access limited to the campus or institution where it was completed.
33%	Manuscripts derived from Web-based dissertations are welcome for submission.
6%	Only if the contents and conclusions in the manuscript were substantially different from the dissertation [would it be considered for publication].
2%	Under no circumstances [would it be considered for publication]. Manuscripts derived from research made widely available via the Web are considered previously published.
27%	Other – please elaborate [with some respondents offering elaboration in a comments section of the survey, with the majority commenting that no policy had yet been set]
2%	Under no circumstances [would it be considered for publication]. Manuscripts derived from research published as part of a dissertation are considered previously published, regardless of format.

## **Additional comments**

Comments received either as part of the survey or as email in lieu of survey participation fall into three categories, with some general comments not as easily categorized.

### *GENERAL COMMENTS*

These comments reflected the confusion that continues to surround the topic of *prior publication* in the context of ETDs. One respondent said, “[w]e reserve the right to alter our policy on prior publication in the light of changing technology.” Others were more rapidly willing to take a stand against ETDs: “In the emerging electronic environment, the very meaning of ‘publication’ is obviously undergoing significant change. Nevertheless, the central issue is public access to the finished work. If that is available, then the work does not require another outlet – hence it is published. Virginia Tech is doing its students considerable harm by ignoring the central concept behind publication.” One journal editor referred the question to a representative of the company that published his journal. The representative replied succinctly, “Please note that we do indeed consider posted electronic theses and dissertations to be previously published material and would not accept them as original publications.”

### *NO POLICY ESTABLISHED*

Several respondents indicated that they had never considered the issue and/or had not yet set policy regarding the question of *prior publication* of ETDs. The consensus among this group was that decisions would be made on a case-by-case basis, ultimately determined by the quality of the paper submitted. One respondent said, “I cannot see that we would object to a paper based on a web-available dissertation. Indeed, it might make for a better paper as readers could be referred to the web-thesis for the fine details or additional data.”

### *PAPER, NOT ELECTRONIC*

Several respondents indicated that they would consider for publication a work derived from an ETD, but that the ETD would either need to be removed from the Web or have “the highest level possible of restrictions on access to the web dissertation, before we would agree to publication.”

### *ORIGINAL vs. DERIVED WORK*

One of the most frequent comments was about the difference between a thesis or dissertation and a work *derived* from a thesis or dissertation, regardless of whether the work was in electronic or paper format: "Chapters in theses and dissertations invariably need a lot of additional work to turn them into publishable papers. Typically a chapter submitted as a paper is not adequately self-contained. References to other chapters, for example, need to be removed and some substantial amount of discussion or argument needs to be put in their places. The author may also wish to rewrite simply because new ideas, arguments, or perspectives came up after the thesis or dissertation was written." Another respondent commented that "many [article] submissions are based on them" but that the expectation is that "an article submitted [would] be different from a dissertation chapter."

### **Conclusions**

The survey results, reviewed in conjunction with the comments received, point out the importance in this discussion of the word *derived*. Though there does seem to be some concern about publishing a thesis or dissertation that had previously appeared in a generally available electronic format, most respondents indicated that a work *derived* from an ETD would be considered for publication. Most went on to say that they rarely published a thesis or dissertation that had not undergone some revisions, which therefore resulted in a *derived* work.

There is a need to continue this kind of data collection and this kind of dialogue with editors and publishers. As reported in the June 2001 issue of *C&RL News*, Keith Jones of Elsevier Science indicated that his company has no problem with publishing articles that are also available as ETDs and went so far as to support the idea of linking back and forth between ETDs and articles published in Elsevier journals. He argued that wide dissemination serves the academic community by making information available quickly and in differing formats.<sup>3</sup>

However, institutions considering or already supporting ETD initiatives need to recognize that there are still concerns to be addressed. Humanities editors and publishers have not yet been surveyed and social sciences entities were only a part of the second survey. The fact that there was a slight increase in the number of entities that see *prior publication* of ETDs as problematic is, in all likelihood, a result of those

entities only recently becoming aware of ETDs as a method of scholarly communication; however, more study of this issue would be valuable.

Dalton's comments, written as part of her conclusions from the first survey, appear to still be true: that there is "more a perception of a problem than an actual problem." Dalton's hope that her study would "begin to build a picture of where opinion was leading with respect to widely disseminated ETDs and their status as 'publications'" is still valid as a conclusion to the second publisher survey. This is new territory for many editors and publishers, and the discussion must continue so that all interested parties – students, advisors, editors and publishers – can be well served by advances in the technology of scholarly communications.

**Notes:**

1. Results from both surveys are available at <http://lumiere.lib.vt.edu/surveys/results>. (Dalton's survey is entitled "Electronic Theses and Dissertations: A Survey of Editors and Publishers" and Seamans' survey is entitled "Electronic Theses and Dissertations: 2001 Survey of Editors and Publishers.")
2. Handouts from the ETD 2001 conference are available at <http://library.caltech.edu/etd>.
3. Gail McMillan, "Do ETDs deter publishers? Coverage from the 4<sup>th</sup> international symposium on ETDs," *C&RL News* 62 (2001) : 620.