

Noble Ideal vs. Potential Risk: A PhD Student's Perspective on Dissertation Embargoes

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Hello. I want to thank the AHA for hosting a panel on this important topic and thank Mary Lou Roberts for inviting me to participate. I found myself somewhat embroiled in what Twitter came to refer to as #AHAGate after offering one of the first comments on the initial statement at the AHA website. Because that was one of the few comments defending the statement, I was interviewed by a reporter doing a story on the statement and the reaction to it. Let me just state my position on open access clearly from the start. I am an academic blogger (at a blog called "The Junto") and I also produce an hour-long monthly podcast about early American history called "The JuntoCast." So, in the last year, in addition to my own academic work which included two journal article submissions under review and dissertation writing, I wrote about 15,000 words on history and academia-related topics for the blog and produced about 10 hours of audio content devoted to my field, in addition to a few public talks. And, on my website, I make freely available all of my conference papers, transcripts of talks I've given, and, even, my dissertation prospectus. So all of my "completed" scholarly and non-academic historical work is distributed openly and for free. And all of that is to say that I am huge proponent of the ideals of open access, particularly making academic work accessible to the broader public.

I am going talk with you for just a few minutes about my perspective as a graduate student on embargoes and on the debate itself . Now I am a graduate student working on a dissertation in a profession where the already steadily shrinking job market is yet to recover from the crash of

2008. So, my perspective on this issue is more personal than idealistic. That is, ideals aside, how will this policy affect me (and other grad students like me)? And I will talk about that specifically in a moment but my stance is pretty simple. I believe graduate students (like all historians) should be able to decide for themselves when and how their work will be distributed. Like the AHA, I am not saying embargoes are right for everyone or that everyone should be compelled to embargo their dissertation. Indeed, for PhDs not seeking a tenure-track position or not seeking to publish their dissertation with a university press, there may be no compelling reason to embargo. Now, I take to heart the argument from critics that those concerned about this issue are relying heavily on anecdotal information. (Though there was an oft-quoted 2011 study that found that almost half of university press directors, at the very least, are starting from a skeptical position when encountering a submission based on an OA ETD). Either way, there seems to me to be enough evidence between anecdotes I've read and heard and this study for me to personally view immediate open access as a POTENTIAL professional risk.

I went back to school by enrolling at a community college at the age of 32, while also working and taking care of my two sons who were 1 1/2 and 5 months old at the time. Counting undergrad and my graduate work, I have been a student for the last 7 1/2 years. Considering the significant time investment, the horrible state of the job market, AND my family responsibilities, why would I do *anything* that might have even the *slightest* chance of limiting the career prospects that, by the time I finish my PhD will have taken near ten years to cultivate. The OA idealist in me wants the dissertation to be as easily available as possible to anyone who might want to read it, but the realist in me wants to make sure that I don't do anything that might diminish my ability to better support my family. Critics have countered by saying that only 24%

of history PhDs end up in tenure-track jobs anyway, but really it's not only POTENTIALLY damaging to the 24% who actually get tenure-track jobs but to all of those who are in the market for them, which is much more than the 24% who eventually get them.

I've actually found it a bit disappointing to see how a field that is usually so highly attuned to historical issues of class has missed the implications of class in the current debate. It seems to me a highly problematic situation to have established academics wanting to impose potentially damaging or limiting policies on some of the most vulnerable people in the profession (e.g., grad students and subsequently recent full-time or adjunct PhDs), especially when this is a decision and problem that many of those established academics did not have to deal with themselves. It's dismaying to see some be so willing to offer up graduate students and recent PhDs as potential collateral damage for an ideal shared by many academics at all career stages. And, if their defense is "we don't fully know what the situation is," then that seems to me to call for more caution not less.

As I said, for me, this primarily comes down to the issue of content ownership. Surely graduate students should have the same control over their dissertations as other historians have over their manuscripts. An argument to the contrary, it seems to me, requires a forthright justification of why that is not so. The problem here seems to me to be that scholars who are already ensconced in their jobs and careers are debating an ideal, while grad students and recent PhDs like myself are debating a policy that directly affects the lives of individuals.

Being an open access proponent, I was heartened by the fact that many people felt compelled to engage in this important debate. But I was also quite *dis*heartened by the structure and tone of the debate. Structurally speaking, the debate (or, I should say, the outrage), at least as

it manifested on Twitter but also in the blogosphere, was largely based on willful misrepresentation, i.e., that the AHA was recommending that all PhDs embargo their dissertations for six years. If that had been the case, I would have been just as critical as anyone else. But, of course, it did not do that. It merely advocated for individual choice. If the policy was so bad, surely one would not have to misrepresent it to be able to criticize it. But, I have to say that, to me, it seemed like, for some, there was just as much if not more interest in being outraged than there was actual outrage with the actual statement. The tone of the debate was disconcerting as well. One article written by a college librarian was condescendingly titled, “The AHA Asks ‘What about the Children?’” Another article on IHE, a recent PhD recounted their interactions with an unnamed UP editor who told her that they would not consider an OA ETD. One of the comments said that if the author won’t name the editor or the press, then it didn’t happen. But while that statement represented a significant line of critique of the AHA’s position, i.e., that there is a lack of hard data on the issue, this type of tone and position, I would argue, is not only unhelpful but actually hinders an important debate.

In the end, we have to recognize that the profession is in a liminal moment in terms of academic production and publication. While the rest of society and many professions have moved into the digital realm, the academic history profession’s structure has not. Historians have taken it upon themselves to bring our work and other perspectives into the digital world. But the administrative structure of the profession (i.e., universities, departments, university presses, and professional organizations) has been much slower to adopt or adapt to the digital environment. The liminality is manifested in this disconnect between historians and the administrative structure of the profession. And I believe our task is to figure out a way collectively to navigate

this moment without leaving the road behind us littered with the corpses of dead careers and dissertations. I believe open access is the unavoidable endgame of the digital revolution in academia. It will inevitably come. And that is a good thing. But the disconnect I mentioned between academics and the administrative structure of the profession means that open access cannot happen in one fell stroke. That is not a reality many of us, myself included, are happy with. But it is the reality nevertheless. That said, I agree that academics need to be more proactive in pushing policies that move us closer toward genuine open access. But to do that on the backs of graduate students (and adjuncts and early career scholars) seems to me to be quite unfair. Established proponents of open access should be leading the parade across the street not pushing graduate students and recent PhDs out into the middle of the road. Open access is a noble ideal and therefore shouldn't require even the potential for risking collateral damage in the form of young scholars' careers at a time when the state of the profession and of junior scholars is more precarious than it has ever been.