KU Leuven Open Science Day

'Your article is in production': So what?

Boris Verbrugge¹

¹KU Leuven

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Abstract

The business model of commercial academic publishers has attracted growing criticism. This criticism has focused primarily on how publishers ‘appropriate’ academic knowledge, before selling it back to universities at exorbitant prices. Little attention is paid to the actual production of books and articles, which takes place between the moment when a manuscript has been accepted for publication, and the moment it is actually published, in the form of a nicely polished article or book.

As part of an [action research project](#) on human rights in our university’s supply chains, we set out to disentangle this production process. Our findings suggest that rather than taking care of production tasks in-house, most publishers have outsourced them to others. More repetitive tasks like typesetting, but increasingly also copy-editing and project management, have gradually moved to low-wage countries such as India and the Philippines. For more complex copy-editing tasks, publishers and their suppliers have increasingly come to rely on specialized firms and on freelance editors. Testimonies from these freelancers, and from workers active in publishing firms in India (in and around the city of Chennai), allow us to identify a number of challenges related to working conditions and salaries.

Surely, these trends towards outsourcing and exploitation are not unique to the academic publishing industry. What is surprising is the lack of attention for these trends in a sector that is so central to our work as academics. It is time for scholars to pay more critical attention to who is doing our ‘dirty work’, and to pressurize publishers into providing full transparency about their production process. It is also important for advocates of Open Access to take on board these concerns about fairness in the academic production process. Insofar as Open Access threatens the profit margins of publishers, there is always a risk that publishers might increase pressure on their own suppliers.

Author biography

[Boris Verbrugge](#) (KU Leuven) obtained his PhD at Ghent University in 2015. For his PhD research, he conducted extensive field research on labor issues in informal gold mining. After having worked for two years as a researcher and lecturer at Radboud University (Nijmegen), he joined the research group sustainable development at HIVA-KU Leuven in 2017 as a senior researcher. At HIVA, Boris is conducting policy-oriented research on human rights and decent work challenges in global value chains, and on

how companies and governments deal with these challenges. Aside from his work at HIVA, Boris is also involved (as a post-doctoral researcher) in a three-year FWO-funded research project on the role of informal gold mining in the global gold market.