

Discussion

Comment on “Peer review, politics and pluralism” by
Chris Harrison, *Environmental Science and Policy* 7, 357–368

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While we scholarly publishers typically take for granted academic freedom as the means that both allows us and compels us to nurture the worthy objective of intellectual pluralism, we tend to appreciate it—and think about its implications—only when academic freedom comes under severe pressure as it does when we publish books as controversial as *The Skeptical Environmentalist*.

1. Shooting the publisher

The major point Chris Harrison makes in his account of the publication of Lomborg is that the reaction on the part of the book’s fiercest critics “went beyond the usual unpicking of a thesis and concentrated instead on the role of the publisher in publishing the book at all.” This is a highly unusual, but not unheard of, state of affairs in university press publishing. It invites a publisher to explore the considerations leading up to the publishing decision, and in this case the same publisher’s actions in defending its decision after the book’s publication. In both cases, Harrison’s account reflects a high degree of professionalism on the part of Cambridge University Press.

In the first place, Cambridge drew on the experience of its social science and natural science editors to pick four peer reviewers of the English translation of the manuscript—not two, as is usual, and is usually adequate, for most university presses. Knowing full well the controversial character of this Danish book from the start, Harrison and his colleagues took every reasonable measure necessary to ensure the quality of their publishing decision—and this decision, made on the basis of four positive reviews, was to recommend to the academic Syndics of the Press that they accept this book for

publication, which the gatekeepers did. The reviewers were chosen from excellent academic departments, represented a variety of disciplinary perspectives, and three were chosen from a list of scholars used to advise the Press on its environmental science publishing program. According to his account, Harrison edited the book carefully (something that cannot be claimed for all university press books). The Cambridge staff then took an important step in enlisting endorsements from a broad spectrum of well-known authorities in launching the book into the world.

When the criticism came, it did so most powerfully in the form of a July 2002 letter signed by a dozen leading American scientists not only for Cambridge University Press to withdraw the Lomborg book from publication, but to review its internal manuscript evaluation procedures—this of a press that for hundreds of years has published tens of thousands of books that that never so much as raised an eyebrow as to the integrity of the process that brought them to market.

If Harrison’s well-documented account is taken seriously, and it is by this reader, then it is hard to challenge his claim that Cambridge accepted and agreed to publish this book not in spite of peer review, but rather because of it.

2. Jury selection

University presses play a central role in the scholarly enterprise—especially that of the tenuring and promotion of authors in the social sciences and humanities. We do this primarily by our decisions to publish, or not publish, certain manuscripts. Many, if not most, academic communities entrust this function to us, and have done so for a very long time. The peer review process represents what economists refer to so gracefully as a “third-part compliance mechan-

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ism” in ensuring that the books we bring to our academic boards for acceptance measure up to standards needed by our scholarly audiences for bestowing tenure, promotion, awards, and other attributes of distinction on fellow academics, and most importantly, to the advancement of knowledge. The selection of peer reviewers, and peer review itself, are thus central to what we do in performing our scholarly function.

Most of the time this process is reasonably straightforward. When our history editor at Princeton receives a promising manuscript of a monograph on 18th century French history that fits her list, she finds two outstanding historians in this field, solicits their reviews, and determines if they recommend publication. She then has a basis on which to recommend publication to our academic Editorial Board. Our five board members study and discuss the proposal using the peer readings as a foundation for their decision, then either accept the manuscript, decline it, or as is often the case, accept it on the understanding that the author will make wise revisions based on the readers’ reviews (or reports, as we call them in Princeton).

Peer review choice and the evaluation of reviewer’s reports are admittedly less cut and dried in the case of cross-disciplinary books such as Lomborg’s *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. Does this make cross-disciplinary books any less appropriate for university presses to publish? No: these books (and books, more than journal articles) are needed to transport scholarly insights from one discipline to another, to raise broad and complex questions about issues that traverse normal disciplinary boundaries, and to identify unanticipated angles and inflection points in scholarly debates. Cross-disciplinary books tend to be exceptions, but are nevertheless crucial to the vitality of scholarly publishing, to say nothing of scholarship itself.

Academics in the field in which I publish, economics, who would argue with this claim need only consider that the great book that forms the foundation of their field, *The Wealth of Nations*, was written by an eighteenth century moral philosopher, Adam Smith, who sought to explore connections between material pursuits and the moral conditions of society. Despite two centuries of galloping specialization, economics still profits by the philosophical moorings of Smith and the further cross-disciplinary insights of scholars from other fields, ranging from history through climatology.

But was the peer review process subjected by Cambridge University Press to Lomborg adequate to its Syndics’ evaluation of this book for publication? On the strength of Harrison’s account, the answer would seem to be yes.

In his more general reflection on the efficacy of peer review, Harrison makes a salient observation: that it is inherently conservative, and hence, “more likely to reinforce dominant paradigms that challenge existing modes of thought.” Presumably, this conservative tendency works

for the most part because it helps to ensure that the decision-making process exercised by university presses correspond generally to the norms and directions of knowledge that inform the work of the scholarly communities whom we publish.

I would go further to say that the broader culture of the university press reinforces the conservatism of our decisions inasmuch as university press editors (and marketers) have little tolerance for flamboyance or grand-standing by their colleagues, and so provide a filter for those of us who would try to make our mark by publishing books that claim that the moon is made of green cheese or that the earth sits at the center of the universe. Thus, adding these informal constraints to the formal measures employed by Cambridge University Press in its decision to recommend Lomborg’s book for publication, it seems the system worked and admirably so.

What resulted was the publication of a controversial cross-disciplinary book that jarred certain citadels of scholarship, but also of a book brought to market by a university press in the broader business of publishing scores of other, perhaps less cross-disciplinary books bounded by the ordinary constraints of academic subject areas. Unless I’m missing something, the publication of Lomborg’s book, taken in the context of Cambridge’s wide and heterogeneous range of peer-reviewed scholarly publications, is exactly what intellectual pluralism is all about: the exception that improves the rule.

3. Pluralism

In the last pages of his article, Mr. Harrison notes that he would be, “delighted if we could publish a book making an equally powerful and accessible case against the sort of environmental optimism that Lomborg advances in *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, and take this platform to advertise this invitation.” In the first instance it reminds me of an old saying, “Now, Barabas was a publisher!”

But the point of Harrison’s declamation is not that he wishes to distance himself from Lomborg; rather that he respects the pluralist imperative of the scholarly enterprise of which he, as an editor and publisher, is a part, and from which we publishers draw our legitimacy as contributors to the preservation and advancement of knowledge.

Much as I would applaud such an anti-Lomborg book (and, readers take note, might like to publish it myself), I doubt that it would get nearly the reception, or sell nearly the number of copies, that Lomborg’s book has. The world just does not work that way. What is important is that such a book be written, along with reviews and articles—pieces that advance this and other vital debates from all perspectives—and that such writings, if they meet the standards of scholarship, be given the chance and support they need to contribute to knowledge. Our responsibility as publishers is

to the dissemination of ideas, even unpopular ones such as construed in books such as *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. Chris Harrison's account of his role and that of his colleagues in the publication of this book reinforces the

centrality of scholarly book publishing in this often untidy function, and suggests that Cambridge University Press, for its part, would make an unwelcome home for the Barabases of this world.