The Publishers Association of Flanders, Belgium, has created a label for peer-reviewed books: the Guaranteed Peer Reviewed Content (GPRC) label (www.gprc.be/en). We introduce the label and the logic behind it. A label for peer-reviewed books encourages transparency in academic book publishing. It is especially relevant for the social sciences and humanities and in the context of performance-based funding of university research.

Introduction

The importance of critical evaluation of publication content has increased considerably over the past decades. Today, peer review (PR), including the double-blind, single-blind, open, and signed variants, is regarded by many as the quintessential mechanism to safeguard academic publishing standards (Benda & Engels, 2011; Bornmann, 2011). Although PR is often debated and innovative ways of evaluation of publications are conceivable and put into practice (e.g., Giménez-Toledo & Román-Román, 2009; Hardaway & Scamell, 2012), virtually all high-esteem journals use some type of PR to assure content quality of published articles (Hames, 2008; Research Information Network, 2010). Hence, the inclusion of journals in citation indexes and academic bibliographic databases depends, among other things, on PR being a part of their editorial procedure.

For scholarly and scientific books, the situation is different. There does not seem to be a consensus on what PR for books precisely entails. Is it only the book proposal, or also one or more of the chapters, or the full manuscript that is reviewed? Is the review conducted by academic peers only or also by an acquisitions editor? Is PR of books focused on the academic content or is it also an assessment by the publisher of the commercial potential of the book? Furthermore, the organization of the PR process may be in the hands of the publisher, an academic board, a series editor, or the book editor. In sum, PR of books is less formalized than journal peer review (Derricourt, 2012).

Regardless of this divergence in formalization of PR, universities worldwide require their faculty to publish peer-reviewed work (Derricourt, 2012). Governments, for their part, increasingly install performance-based research funding systems (PRFS) in which peer-reviewed publications are an important factor (Hicks, 2012). In such systems, trustworthy demonstrability is crucial to achieve accountability and transparency (Frølich, 2011). As this context is particularly challenging for the social sciences and humanities, the European Science Foundation has taken the initiative to categorize academic journals via the European Reference Index in the Humanities (ERIH) and to analyze the possibility of a comprehensive bibliographic database (Martin et al., 2010). Currently, however, the inclusion of books poses a particular challenge because there is no straightforward way to decide whether they have been subjected to PR. Indeed, in view of the inclusion of books in their recently launched Book Citation Index (BKCI; Adams & Testa, 2011), Thomson Reuters has installed an editorial selection process that involves interaction with publishers to obtain sufficient information (Brennan, 2012). Given this international context, the Guaranteed Peer Review Content (GPRC) label for books we describe in this brief communication clearly is relevant beyond the Flemish context in
which it is currently applied. The label can help to tackle some of the challenges publication performance measurement poses.

Introduction of a Label for Peer-Reviewed Books in Flanders

In Flanders, the Northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, peer-reviewed monographs, edited books, and book chapters in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) are eligible for inclusion in the regional performance-based research funding system (PRFS). To this end, and more generally to achieve comprehensive coverage of the regional academic output, the Flemish Academic Bibliographic Database for the Social Sciences and Humanities (“Vlaams Academisch Bibliografisch Bestand voor de Sociale en Humanistische Wetenschappen” or VABB-SHW, www.ecoom.be/en/vabb) was constructed (Engels, Ossenblok, & Spruyt, 2012). As a parameter in the regional PRFS, in 2012 the VABB-SHW determined 2.7% of each university’s share. The Flemish government entrusted an independent body of academics with the task of selecting the peer-reviewed outputs published since 2000 from the whole set of SSH publications that the universities submitted for inclusion in the VABB-SHW. However, this task proved especially difficult for book publications (Ghesquière, Van Bendegem, Gillis, Willems, & Cornelissen, 2011). After considerable debate, it was decided to include all book publications by a limited number of publishers (82) that had been identified as the most prestigious and selective in the SSH in a similar exercise in Norway (Engels et al., 2012; Sivertsen, 2010). Three publishers were added in 2011, and another 33 will be added in 2012. Clearly, however, accepting all book publications by a limited number of publishers and rejecting all others implies a lack of granularity.

Part of a solution for this lack of granularity came from the Publishers Association of Flanders (“Vlaamse Uitgeversvereniging”), which introduced in mid-2010 a quality label for individual books guaranteeing the peer-reviewed character of their contents, the so-called “GPRC label” (Benelux Trademark No. 0916696). The stated goal of the GPRC (as mentioned on the website www.gprc.be/en) is to allow individual books by publishers with a hybrid, partially peer-reviewed portfolio to be included in the VABB-SHW. For GPRC-labeled books, publishers are required to demonstrate the evaluation of that book through a standardized PR procedure. This demonstrability is defined as the availability of a PR dossier that contains at least the following components: (a) a table of contents of the publication, (b) information on the reviewers’ institutional affiliation, (c) a chronological overview of the different phases of the review procedure, (d) at least two review reports, and (e) a formal confirmation that the reviewers authorize publication with the GPRC label. Based on such evidence, 22 monographs and edited books published in 2010 have been included in the current (second) version of the VABB-SHW, which spans the years 2001 to 2010. With 51 GPRC-labeled books published in 2011 and 43 in the first half of 2012, the quality label is steadily gaining ground. So far, 11 Flemish publishing houses have applied the label, a number that is likely to increase as the procedure becomes better known both to authors and publishers. This will result in an increasing number of GPRC-labeled books to be included in the VABB-SHW, thus further improving its coverage of peer-reviewed SSH publications by academics affiliated to universities in Flanders.

Wider Relevance of the GPRC Label

As explained earlier, the creation of a label for peer-reviewed books is relevant beyond the Flemish context. One could argue, however, that despite the lack of granularity, it is still more efficient to determine at the publisher level whether books contain peer-reviewed content. Yet, even specialized scientific publishers, including prestigious university presses, often publish a variety of books, including undergraduate textbooks and popular science books. This again illustrates the need to label peer-reviewed books. In terms of efficiency, part of a solution could be found in selection at the series level. This, however, entails other problems, both intrinsic and technical. From a technical perspective, the problem arises that unambiguous identification of a book series based on a shared ISSN (as opposed to consecutive ISBN) is uncommon. Intrinsically, additional questions regarding the modalities of PR of series arise. For instance, the role of the series editor(s) may vary widely, ranging from being one of the reviewers, to being the person to organize the PR process, to a more limited role as the decision maker regarding whether a book fits in the series but who then leaves the organization of the PR to the editor of the book. Such information is not regularly available on the website of a series; hence, it is difficult to establish whether a series can be considered peer-reviewed without consultation of the publisher. So for series publications, too, a quality label to attest PR might increase transparency. Publishers of a more hybrid type who are not exclusively academic but who do regularly publish scholarly books especially could use a label to allow swift identification of peer-reviewed content in their portfolio. Indeed, publishers that do not primarily target an academic audience will often publish work by SSH researchers. These books may be part of the national literature, as distinct from the nonscholarly literature, that SSH scholars produce (Hicks, 2004). For this reason, a quality label for peer-reviewed books is particularly relevant to SSH publishers and scholars.

Ideally, GPRC or a similar label would be introduced by publishers in many countries. Wide international adoption of PR labeling at the level of books or book series would certainly facilitate coverage of book publications by citation indexes and bibliographic databases. There are, however, barriers to entry as well as risks associated with such a label. The GPRC label is a registered trademark, preventing non-Flemish publishers and publishers’ associations from adopting the label without reaching an agreement with the
Flemish Publishers Association. From the point of view of the latter, this might be a conscious strategy because it strengthens the position of local publishers as the only ones who can publish GPRC-labeled books. Indeed, academics at Flemish universities frequently publish books with Dutch and other European publishing houses, but so far these books, unless they appear with one of the publishers belonging to the select group whose books are all included in the VABB-SHW, are not identified as peer-reviewed even if they are. Thus, the GPRC label could become an incentive for local publishing if many other peer-reviewed books are excluded from the VABB-SHW. Of course, when choosing a publisher, academics will take into account several other considerations as well, so it remains to be seen whether this worry is warranted. In the long-term, regardless of the evolution in Flanders, we believe that with the increasing demand for accountability and the rapid rise of performance-based funding systems, also for the SSH, more and more publishers and publishers’ associations will feel the need to be transparent about PR of their books.

Conclusion

The GPRC label fills a gap in the area of book publishing because it is often unclear whether a monograph or an edited book has been subjected to PR prior to publication. The specific context in Flanders provided the incentives for the launch of the quality label, the idea of which is relevant for academics, governments, publishers, and publishers’ associations worldwide.

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References


