

The bizarre story of how lippy librarians faced down a silly publisher

A university librarian faced a lawsuit over a critical blog post about the publishing house Edwin Mellen Press but online solidarity won out. By Dominic Burbidge.



In August 2010, Dale Askey, of McMaster University, wrote in a blog that Edwin Mellen Press (EMP) was a “dubious publisher” producing “second-class scholarship.” In response, the publishing house brought two cases against Mr Askey, arguing that his comments constituted libel and damaged the company’s reputation.

Whilst most of us would view EMP’s commitment to their reputation as a bit too energetic, their allegations did not stop there. The publishing house went on to sue Rick Anderson, a librarian at the University of Utah, for his criticisms of EMP’s original legal action. In a post [describing Mr Askey’s dilemma](#), Mr Anderson agreed that EMP’s books were “generally overpriced and of poor

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quality” and that he had spoken with the owner of the company, Dr Herbert Richardson, who he felt conducted “easily the strangest conversation I’ve ever had with a publisher.”

As if these two court cases were not bizarre enough, EMP also went on to sue a freelance copy-editor, Kristine Hunt. Her sin was posting a comment on Mr Anderson’s blog, writing that EMP offered its authors “no copy-editing, proofreading or layout services.” EMP defended themselves, saying that the company “employs persons whose specific job descriptions are to proof, to format and to copy-edit manuscripts,” but failed to mention whether the employees actually do what their job description suggests. In any case, they felt it was time to sue Ms Hunt.

Although very slow in coming to their librarian’s aid, McMaster University eventually made a [statement](#) in support of Mr Askey, defending freedom of speech as “a critical social good” and affirming that the university would resist the pressure of EMP to disavow their librarian. This was an honourable stance, and does credit to their academic vocation. At the same time, however, it was not our lippy librarians’ main source of strength.

Through social networking sites, online news and a [petition](#), the librarians’ standoff caused a storm of resentment against EMP that ruined its marketplace credibility. According to an [associate librarian at York University](#), EMP’s biggest mistake was how they seemed to be “hell-bent on torturing their reputation with people who’ve got to be 99 percent of the people who are buying their books.”

In this age of social networks, reputation matters, especially amongst those professionals likely to share advice informally. In terms of their public relations, EMP could not have played their cards worse. The acronym EMP may as well stand for Electro Magnetic Pulse grenade, a weapon used by the military to short circuit electronic devices. Not only has the EMP grenade been set off by their decision to threaten law suits left, right and centre, the company also seem to have been exposed online for [buying the internet domain names](#) of their original critic, as if attempting to pre-empt Mr Askey trying to broadcast his situation through a home page. As [can be seen here](#), the domain name www.daleaskey.com has been registered to someone using an EMP company email address, leading critics to posit this as a “possibly bizarre” attempt to circumvent the online dominance of the lippy librarians.

Rubbing salt into the wound, one blog [published](#) the letters sent by the EMP lawyers to Anderson and Hunt, allowing all to see the manner in which their rights to hold a professional opinion and exercise free speech have been victimised. If all this is insufficient to detonate the EMP grenade, numerous blogs have shown how we can now go back in time through internet archives such as the [Wayback Machine](#) to see the original comments of our lippy librarians and assess for ourselves whether they constitute defamation.

Collectively, librarians are managing to face down an aggressive publisher. They achieve this through the power of the internet, running high legal risks just to save their right to criticise what

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they are being sold. Underneath the razzmatazz and legal rat race, however, there lies a real and serious difficulty. Popular power may be enough to bring down corporate reputations, but it is little consolation for those academics who previously published with EMP. Those authors may have found their manuscripts to be poorly edited but had little other option at the time but to go with the publishing house who had agreed to work with them. They now find their publications are unwanted by universities en masse.

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Published on: May 27, 2013