

MY ROUTE TOWARDS PhD

By Rutherford



In 2002, while teaching at EAI Tech in Sophia Antipolis, I came across an article ([*Doctorate by Media Practice*](#)) by the filmmaker Erik Knudsen in the *Journal of Media Practice* which explained how he had drawn on his body of previous work as the basis for a successful application for a PhD-by-practice.

I decided that, if and when I elected to pursue a PhD, I would follow the route he had described.

When, in May 2013, I met with Professor Neville Ford of the Research & Knowledge Transfer office at the University of Chester to discuss the options available to me for a PhD, I showed him the article by Erik Knudsen in the *Journal of Media Practice* and asked whether I could follow the same route based on a number of my recent photographic projects. Professor Ford explained that, while the university allowed PhD-by-practice, at Chester, PhD-by-practice required that the ‘practice’ had to be a project undertaken after approval of the application – rather than a body of work already completed. He explained that, if I wished to base my application on work previously undertaken, this would be a ‘PhD-by-publication’ in which the ‘publications’ were projects in the public domain completed within the previous five years. If my application to undertake a ‘PhD-by-publication’ was approved, I would then be given two years to prepare and submit a critical evaluation of approximately 10,000-15,000 words (as had also been required of Dr. Knudsen) to locate these projects within an academic context.

Professor Ford asked me to prepare a brief (2,000-word) statement explaining how, if my application was approved, I proposed to interrogate the projects (the ‘publications’). This statement, together with my application form and a copy of the university’s regulations, was sent to two external reviewers who were asked to evaluate the merit of the proposed critical interrogation of the ‘publications’.

In December 2013, the two external reviewers to whom my application had been submitted rejected it based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the basis on which the application was made:

- i) Despite the clear explanation in the accompanying statement that *The ‘publications’ on which this application is based are the photographic projects undertaken by the applicant* (rather than articles published in peer-reviewed journals), both of the external reviewers rejected my application based on their evaluation of my articles published in peer reviewed journals (which they had apparently sought out and accessed via my **LinkedIn** page).
- ii) From their comments, it was also evident that both had ignored the regulations and the accompanying letter by Professor Ford (explaining that, if approved, I would be required to prepare a 10,000-15,000 word critical evaluation of these ‘publications’ to put these into an academic context) and assumed that I had requested the award of PhD based only on the 2,000-word statement accompanying the application form.

(I also found it particularly frustrating to read, in the comments by one of the external reviewers that s/he had “*scrutinised the application documentation closely*”.)

In January 2014, Professor Ford agreed that the two reviewers had fundamentally misconstrued both the regulations and the documents sent to them – and so agreed to set aside the evaluations by these two reviewers and find two others who understood the basis on which my application was made.

In March 2014, despite having included the explicit statement that *The ‘publications’ on which this application for PhD-by-publication is based are my photographic projects – NOT my published articles in peer-reviewed journals*, the two new external reviewers to whom Professor Ford had sent my revised application rejected it based on (in the words of one): “*the [lack of] evidence of an original and distinct contribution to knowledge in peer-reviewed journals*”. Sigh.

In September 2015, Professor Ford advised me that he had found a way to re-frame my application to fit within the university's guidelines for PhD-by-practice. I thanked him for his efforts and explained that I had recently resigned from the University of Chester to accept a post at Bournemouth University.

In October 2015, in a meeting with two members of the research committee* at Bournemouth, I was informed that, for a PhD-by-publication-by-practice, the body of work would be required to meet the same standards of peer-evaluated esteem as articles in peer-reviewed publications. (*What evidence is there that your peers recognise your work as a significant contribution to knowledge in the field? Has your work been exhibited in major galleries? Has it been reviewed in reputable arts publications?*)

* Here's a funny thing: one of the members of the research committee told me that, when she mentioned me and the subject of my proposed PhD project to her partner, he told her "*I think I'm related to him*". It turns out that her partner is my second cousin. We met him in 1984 when, as a young man of 20, he came to visit Canada, and stayed with us at our home in Toronto. We last saw him in 1987, when my wife, daughter and I stayed briefly with his parents near Reading on our way to live in New Zealand.

While the photographic projects on which I intended to base my application for (what Bournemouth calls) a 'PhD-by-publication-by-practice' were acknowledged to be the results of valid and valuable practice-based research, as I was unable to provide evidence (such as reviews of my exhibitions) that the photographic projects have been recognised by my peers as a contribution to knowledge in the field, they did not constitute the required evidence for a PhD-by-publication-by-practice. Accordingly, as it is a condition of my contract to make "significant progress towards the completion of a PhD within two years", I had no choice but to do it 'the hard way' and undertake a traditional PhD.

In an article [*Photography as an act of collaboration*](#) in which I described the ideas I intend to explore in my research was published in February 2014 in (where else?) the *Journal of Media Practice*.

From the Initial Review document:

Summary of the proposed research

Exploring clues within existing knowledge and practice (mine and others') in the pursuit of a new understanding of the nature of photography and the photograph, this project will consider whether:

1. It is possible that, in some cases, the way in which the photographic medium renders / depicts *the things in front of the lens* results in an image (a scene, object, event or 'moment') that did not previously exist 'out there' – but which was instead created by the act of photographing it?
2. The near-ubiquitous use of the term 'taking' photographs predisposes us to see photographs as an objective record of *the things in front of the lens* 'as they really were' and hinder us from seeing photographs as a record of something else? And if so, what might be the effect(s) of this on our perception of photographs (and possibly, on our conception of what is 'real')?
3. How such a hypothesis can be tested? (How can I know?)

These issues will be explored from three perspectives: academic, professional practice and intuitive.

In response to my application for PhD studies, in April 2015, I was informed that:

Your application was very positively received by the Research Degrees Committee yesterday, and was felt to be a strong proposal. You have been registered; we now need to identify appropriate supervision for your project.

The principal supervisor chosen for me was a recently appointed Professor of Media: Erik Knudsen – author of the article *Doctorate by Media Practice* published (2002) in the *Journal of Media Practice*.