

Social Collaboration and Social Networking

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Will social collaboration undermine scholarly publishing?

As if the angst caused by the proliferation of open access declarations, mandates and institutional repositories were not enough...There is also the emergence of data, datasets and e-science – as referred to in the previous SCR report for Serials e-News – which has heightened awareness that the traditional scholarly communication system faces a challenge. Is this fear of the future being further exacerbated by what can either be interpreted as another nail in the coffin or as an opportunity to be embraced? In fact is the scholarly publishing industry being projected into a perfect storm as all three processes, and some still in embryo, meet and impact on the way books and journals are published? It is certainly apparent that the challenge from social collaboration, otherwise known as Web 2.0, is dominating presentations being given at recent leading publisher conferences and meetings. This may be an indicator that social collaboration may be seen by some to be undermining scholarly publishing. And open access is already passé.

Social networking, social collaboration or Web 2.0 - this is a grass roots movement within society. It has its origins as far as publishing is concerned in the US's west coast and is based on concepts such as the wisdom of the crowds (James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of the Crowds – why the many are smarter than the few*) – the assumption being that the real knowledge, understanding and wisdom lies within the community and not just with a few selected experts, such as referees. It has led to pundits including David Weinberger writing books about the threat to Authority (copies of his book *Everything is Miscellaneous* were generously distributed to selected delegates at the recent NFAIS meeting), and other pundits such as Andrew Keen reporting to the International STM Conference in Frankfurt last year that this process would result in a dumbing down of society (as in 'The Cult of the Amateur'). Web 2.0 has its vocal supporters and opponents, as indeed does the open access movement which has mainly preceded it as an area of concern.

The real challenge which social collaboration and social networking make is against the formal refereeing system. Underpinning the new user generated media (UGM, another description of social collaboration output) is the belief that the digital environment can undertake its own method of selecting the good from the bad. Digital systems are supported by metadata and a network of linking which allows the community, through the process of navigating through the metadata, to be pointed in the direction of what is best. Best in this case can be written as being 'most popular'. Google perfected this idea ten years ago with its PageRank algorithm, and since then the digital information system has begun to separate from the print-based publication system in a big way. As one speaker at a publisher conference recently claimed, 'messiness' is a desirable aim, and the

solution to messiness is to create more metadata and more links. In that respect the social collaboration/networking system is scaleable.

Scaleability of the traditional refereeing system was to some extent questioned by Mark Ware in his report for the Publishing Research Consortium on refereeing systems in that the most productive referees were already exceeding an arbitrary norm in terms of the number of articles they were being asked to vet. Yet at the same conference at which Ware reported his findings, the Academic Publishing in Europe in Berlin in late January, the future director general of CERN presented data which indicated that physicists, for example, have a time window each week which would allow them to take part in social collaborative work. The implication is that there is more scope in the web 2.0 world to cope with feedback and commentary than there is in the present formal and more rigid editorial structure.

One of the underlying assumptions is that 'communication' and dialogue will take over from a monologue in publication. That refereeing will become open and iterative. The system will become awash with commentaries. This may be the case in the world of online and interactive gaming, but will it translate into the world of Science?

We seem to be in the situation in which open access was in a few years ago - A good idea from a society perspective but unworkable. Authors in particular seem unconvinced about the value of open access in terms of their particular needs. They are being forced into the new business model through mandates being imposed by powerful funding agencies, under the threat that if the researcher does not comply they give up any chance of getting future fund allocations. Even though the brand of the established journal, the production and editorial quality which the publishing system maintains and the distribution networks which have been created and sustained by publishers fit in better with the author's immediate needs of gaining respect, recognition and visibility within their peer group. These author preferences were highlighted in some extensive market research work undertaken by CIBER in recent years.

It could be said that the similar arguments may be emerging again in the social collaborative process. In this case the pressure to adapt is coming from claims that the traditional, formal publication system is too slow. That through establishing a new and open system to underpin the communication around a particular research project, the results would not only be better (the wisdom of the crowds argument) but also made available more quickly. The arguments in this case are not driven by openness and fairness, but more by issues of apparent speed and immediacy.

So whilst open access dismantles the traditional business model, and offers a largely unproven alternative of author pays or institutional repositories; and whilst the data deluge challenges the text-only publication of journals; now we have an additional threat in that the main pillar of the scientific publication system – the refereeing process – may be undermined by an emerging conversation at the grass roots within the community.

This may not be as far-fetched as it may appear. There are examples of social collaboration schemes in place. Wikipedia is a classic example of a product of an

extensive social interaction. It has undermined Encyclopedia Britannica, an exemplar of carefully controlled editorial work, carefully refereed before being included in a highly structured reference work. Yet within a few short years an alternative system arose from all ranks of society to voluntarily, without payment, produce written descriptions of items which in many instances are comparable in quality and probably more extensive and up-to-date in content than EB. It even makes a virtue of its fallibility – it owns up publicly to the fact that some items need further work, require additional elaboration. This increases its popular appeal.

But social interaction also panders to another social mechanism which has derived from the digital revolution. That, given the mass of material both formal and informal which is now becoming available in a digital form, 'something is often good enough'. Google has created this acceptance that there is no need to go down the list beyond the first page or two of hits, that the web of links is sufficient to make the cream rise to the top. In many instances this may be enough, but for Science where esoteric information is often as valuable as the more popular, such reliance on the social matrix of interactions to provide answers may not be the best way forward. One does wonder whether, certainly in the early days of the Web 2.0 movement, high quality scientific, technical and medical progress may suffer from the dumbing down process.

But is this just growing pains? Will Web 2.0 take on the same sort of respectability in Science as it has in other areas of information and entertainment? This is unclear at present, and may explain the current focus of publishers at meetings and conferences in which social collaboration and social networking has taken centre stage. It was an undercurrent at the Academic Publishing in Europe meeting; it was more apparent in the American Association of Publishers PSP division meeting in Washington in early February, and was even an even more central theme at the National Federation of Abstracting and Indexing Services conference in Philadelphia in late February. Was this just general interest in a new and emerging feature of the digital revolution, relevant perhaps more to other sectors of society? Or was it a worry that the Web 2.0 could spill over into mainstream scholarly publication in due course, raising the spectre that the traditional refereed publishing system, organised and administered by experts and professionals, is being threatened by a process which has its foundation in the wisdom of the crowds?