

Editorial

What researchers told us about their experiences and expectations of scholarly communications ecosystems

Based on a panel session held at the UKSG One-Day Conference: London, November 2016

Publishers, vendors and librarians often discuss the needs of the researcher. However, it is not often that information professionals have the opportunity to sit down with a group of researchers, listen to their perspective and ask them questions. The UKSG One-Day Conference held in London in November 2016 offered such an opportunity with a panel session of researchers chaired by Charlie Rapple of Kudos.

The researchers shared with us their frustrations about scholarly communications ecosystems and their ideas for improvements. A major source of frustration is the need for academics to publish, and publish well, to keep their jobs and progress. In doing so, they face what seem to be often insurmountable obstacles that they feel powerless to address or change. Themes of the session were the lack of incentives to peer review and join editorial boards, the role of social networking sites, open access and collaboration with libraries.

The researchers who so generously gave us their time are Professor Andy Miah (University of Salford), Dr Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh (Dublin Business School) and Dr Sabina Michnowicz (Hazard Centre, University College London).



Charlie Rapple began by asking the panellists to rate (poor, reasonable, or good) the current scholarly communications ecosystem in terms of how well it helps in the dissemination of their work. Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh and Sabina Michnowicz gave a rating of reasonable, but Andy Miah said, 'I'm a very optimistic person, so I'm going to go with poor as my answer!' Charlie Rapple was not filled with joy by these ratings and explored further, first by asking about the submission process.

Sabina Michnowicz pointed out that finding the right journal is the first challenge. 'That's before you even get to reading the 30-page instructions to authors and the trauma that comes with that or the trauma that comes with being rejected and then wondering where you're going to take it next'. Mícheál Ó Fathartaigh is a historian whose submission experience is quite positive, but who, like Sabina, finds that author guidelines can be quite intimidating. 'They tend to be quite straightforward once you have dealt with the shock of having to read 30 pages of very specific requirements for your little piece of work.'

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Once the author guidelines have been digested they reported that it tends to be straightforward to format a piece of work for submission. In general, they thought the peer-review process tends to be satisfactory and feel that it is trustworthy and feedback tends to be very fair-minded and robust. However, it is the lack of recognition for providing peer review which is a major challenge. Sabina said, 'For early career researchers like myself peer review can be quite time-consuming against other commitments. I'm sure as you go up the scale towards professors they'll tell you that their time is even more

limited, but if you're quite new to the process of peer review then it probably takes a bit longer than if you're a bit more established at it, and for many of my colleagues and myself, we have a section on our CVs saying these are the things that we've peer reviewed. You can't always be extremely specific if it was an anonymous review obviously but you can try and give an indication. What would be nice would be if we could make that more formal from the side of the publishers so even if it's just something like, 'This researcher has reviewed x number of papers for us' if they can't say which ones, that's fine, or 'in this field/area'.

Andy agreed the whole ecosystem around peer review is something that can be dramatically improved to make sure that people are recognized for what they do and to incentivize people to be editors. He said that there may be reasons to serve as an editor, but as a resource decision it is a hard choice. He said that journals can do more to support innovation and build communities of editorial boards around them. 'I think we're asked to do so much for the noble cause that there's a black hole within this economy around academia that is actually frustrating progress rather than enabling it, and I think that whole economy needs relooking at, because I think to do a good job as an editor requires a lot of time, so you have to be incentivized timewise if not economically. Now one way you can do that as a publisher perhaps is again to look at that editorial board, that community, as something that you can bring added value to rather than just let them go about their own way, and be the platform for them to publish in. I don't think that there's enough of that happening and I think unless you really address that community of a journal then we're constantly just trying to fit it in.'

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Sabina pointed out that because academics are giving valuable time to peer review, this can add to the log-jam in the process. She pointed to an issue she recently experienced in editing a book. 'You've got people writing the chapters, researchers writing the chapters, and then it goes off to peer review, and because I guess one of the hurdles is getting those peer reviews back, often as an editor you feel that you can't chase those reviews too much because people are using their spare time, they're effectively volunteering for you to do that, whereas if there was some sort of recognition or incentivization for them, then you could be quite strict and say, "Right, you've got three weeks

73 to do this" or "six weeks to do this," and you would feel that you had much more authority to do that, because they were getting something in return, so it was more of a transaction.'

This log-jam is a challenge for all of them. Mícheál pointed to the huge pressure on academics to constantly churn out peer review material, particularly in the UK, and, even though there are a lot of journals in his area, he believes that more are needed because turnaround is the big issue for academics. 'It takes us a long time to put together these pieces, then we send them off to what we think might be a home for them and we hear nothing more. We're like Hugh Grant's character in Notting Hill, when Julia Roberts' character goes off, you see him through the year and the changing of the seasons and we wonder, how's our article now, how is she getting on, when will we ever see her again? And oftentimes there may be no happy dénouement in this story. So, what we'd really like to see is as far as possible some more feedback, a definite acknowledgement when we make a submission, not just, "We have received your article". Something along the lines of, "Our editorial board thinks this article has the potential to be a fit for this journal" and then perhaps some kind of a date in a certain amount of months' time when we could expect to have some sort of a concrete reply.'

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A member of the audience took the opportunity to ask the panellists about their use of academic social networking sites and social media, wondering if sites such as ResearchGate and Mendeley, which are producing social media platforms to enable researchers to collaborate, are wasting their time and money. Sabina said that she does use social media platforms, but mainly as a second-level search engine. 'If I'm looking for papers or research groups working in an area that perhaps I don't know too much about and I want to know a bit more about it, it's a nice way of seeing where people are based, what they're working on, who they're collaborating with and if they've put their papers up then that's even better because you can just get them straight from there. A couple of times I've been involved in asking and answering questions so they have forums where you can ask questions and then you're able to see who answers so you know you're getting an expert opinion rather than perhaps in a more anonymous sort of forum. So, I think they're quite good for that. In terms of looking for a collaborator, I've never gone on one of those to think, "Who could partner me with that?" I think that's a more organic thing that happens at conferences or when you're on fieldwork, for me anyway.'

Mícheál said that in his field a cultural paradigm shift would be required 'because historians tend to be notoriously covetous about whatever they're doing and they don't want to share even within a collaborative context'. However, he thinks that social media could be very useful for the sharing of source material. 'A revolution is taking place in terms of the digitization of primary sources and what that has meant for historical scholarship, and the more that the material that's being digitized can be disseminated, the word about it can be gotten around, I think that's what would really inspire historians to engage with social media.'

'a cultural paradigm shift would be required'



Andy on the other hand uses social media all the time. 'I've said to people that ignoring social media today is like ignoring e-mail in 1994, it is a shift in how communications take place. Those specific platforms of ResearchGate, Mendeley, don't feel like communities and I use them like a search engine as well. A reason they're not communities is, they're not optimized for mobile and that's a massive shift in how we do anything. A lot of my collaborations with people now take place in WhatsApp groups, and that's one of the core daily bases of correspondence, but certainly a platform like Twitter is a phenomenal platform for not

74 just collaboration but for awareness of what your key peers are doing and it becomes a discovery engine rather than a search engine, because it tells you what's going on with the world. I have 70 people in my school alone out in the world doing their fieldwork and I can't meet up for coffee to know about what they're doing. I have a Twitter list of all of them in one channel and I can see what's going on, and that for me is a fantastic way of being connected with them, so that when we do meet up at a school congress I can say, "How was your trip to Chernobyl?" And that sort of thing is again a shift in how conversation takes place, and I think it's probably superficial to say that collaboration doesn't happen, because it's often that those conversations are a starting point for a later, deeper or more complex collaboration, and that's where social media is very good.'

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Another member of the audience asked the panellists if they consider open access an important development, or is it an irrelevance, an annoying thing that they have to deal with in the publication process? Sabina said, 'I think it's a great idea and I think that most academics don't go into academia for the money, it's because they enjoy their subject and there's a lot of pressure on us to publish for our career. But I think given the choice of whether your paper is open access or not, most academics would go for open access because ultimately you want people to read it. The problem comes up when it's a question of how that open access is going to be funded, because that can be quite difficult, so sometimes you can secure the funding for that paper to become open access through your institution but very rarely will they cover the whole cost ... it might be fairly modest to a research institution but to an individual it's going to be quite significant. If people don't know about what sort of places they can go to get the funding, [knowing] that would be of huge benefit to researchers.'

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Andy is an advocate of open access but is not sure that it is the way to reach a wider audience. 'I work with lots of different people outside of academia who I think would benefit from having access to these articles that we publish but to find a way of getting them into the platform is the challenge, in the same way that if you are someone that works with a museum and knows that there's a certain demographic that doesn't come through your door, despite it being open. The idea that open access simply means that there will be an intrinsic good and we'll all be better off is, I think, naïve. We need to have more strategic initiatives to target users of journals and articles to get the real benefit of that whole shift in how we think about what we do.'

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Sabina added that libraries can provide support in making a paper open access, for example her library will negotiate with publishers about how to enable open access so that her work can be on the institutional repository. However, Andy Miah said that there's a lot more to be done to rethink that relationship between the academics and the library services. For example, he collaborated in a recent project to take the library to Victoria Train Station as part of the Manchester Science Festival. They set up a pop-up library of ideas as part of the festival programme, and had a fantastic attendance across the festival, and the project was a way of the library re-engaging with academics that they hadn't had much contact with at all. Andy said that academics expect libraries and services to support them, but projects such as this enable more of a conversation and the development of an innovation community.

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To cite this article:

Estelle, L, Editorial: What researchers told us about their experiences and expectations of scholarly communications ecosystems, *Insights*, 2017, 30(1), 71-75; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.349>

Published by UKSG in association with Ubiquity Press on 10 March 2017