

The Scholarly Kitchen

BUSINESS MODELS, COMMERCE, ECONOMICS, HISTORICAL, MARKETING, SOCIAL ROLE, TECHNOLOGY

Putting Society Publishing in Context

POSTED BY JOSEPH ESPOSITO · JUL 16, 2012 · 9 COMMENTS

FILED UNDER DIRECT MARKETING, LIBRARIES, PUBLISHING, ROBERT MAXWELL, SPUTNIK

Robert Maxwell

[Editor's note: This is the text of a presentation Joe Esposito delivered at the meeting of the Oxford University Press Delegates in New York on July 12, 2012.]

What I would like to do today is to provide some context for society publishing. Partly this context is historical: How did we get here? But it's also political in the sense that there are various groups all vying for some of the same territory that professional societies occupy or aspire to occupy. I think it's important to recognize that there is not one big scholarly community, whose members all share the same goals and pursue them in unison. The various constituencies assert their own interests, sometimes less self-consciously than others. To some extent, the economics of society publishing are influenced by these rivalries.

Let's begin with the historical context. None of this, even in its sharply simplified form, will be unfamiliar to this audience, but I do want to stress a particular theme, that significant changes in the landscape are often the result of unanticipated consequences.

So let's take the time machine back to post-war Europe and the emergence of Robert Maxwell, who was the principal architect of the publishing paradigm that we all work within today. That era may be coming to a close, but the end is coming slowly. Prior to Maxwell, a conventional way for societies to support publications was to require that their membership pay annual dues. One of the benefits of membership was a free subscription to the society's publication. People who were not part of the society could still get access to the publication, but they would have to subscribe to it for a fee. This seems fair in retrospect: membership has its privileges, non-members pay a price. That was a different time, of course. Now, access to information is felt by many to be an entitlement that carries with it no responsibilities.

Maxwell, before anyone knew he was a complete rogue, began a concerted effort to acquire institutional rights to the publications of many professional societies. Over time, the library sales channel became increasingly important, a situation that was abetted, at least in the U.S., by the launch of Sputnik and the university funding that grew out of that. Even now many journals

publishers report that they derive 85% of their revenues from academic libraries, so Maxwell is still very much with us. And of course the library channel is not dependent entirely on society-based publications, as more and more titles are created directly by publishers outside the context of a professional society. All this tends to diminish the role of professional societies in publishing.

We reached a critical inflection point when publishers began to deliver content in electronic form and libraries began to acquire it. What's important about digital technology is not the technology itself but the reordering of the value chain — the marketing environment — that digital technology makes possible, even inevitable. In this regard, two things emerged from the introduction of electronic publishing. First, many small society publishers found the technical requirements and cost of digital publishing to be beyond them, so there was a rush to join forces with larger, better capitalized publishers. This is still the case today, and it is one of the reasons that we are all sitting in this room together.

Second, and more insidiously, with electronic publishing came remote access. This meant that a scholar could access a society's journal — or thousands of journals — from the privacy of his or her study. For some scholars this meant reevaluating the cost of society membership, especially for those societies for which the "free" or discounted publication was the principal membership benefit. Some societies found it harder to recruit and retain members, but they could not easily cut off their sales to libraries to end the erosion of their membership. This was because the society was by this time highly reliant on the income from institutional sales. This was an unanticipated consequence of the first order.

So here we have a tug of war. We have the world of the academic library, with its large budgets for the purchase of materials, and the world of the professional society. Switching metaphors, we can think of a library as a vertical space, closely aligned with the requirements of its parent institution, which includes providing a research and educational environment for its undergraduates, whose needs are broad, covering multiple disciplines, but not necessarily deep. And then we have the horizontal axis of the professional society, which spans many institutions. A marine biologist is as likely to have colleagues in universities in Tokyo, Cambridge, and Sao Paulo as he or she is to have one in the office next door. That horizontal group, the professional society, seeks and receives support from the vertical group, and no one should be surprised when the individual institutions assert their prerogatives.

Another element in the current environment is the funding organizations, many of which are also expressing interest in the outcomes of their investments. Broadly speaking, these groups fall into three categories: government agencies, philanthropies, and, of course, the universities themselves, which underwrite a great deal of research directly. These groups impose constraints on what researchers can do with their published work. This is not unreasonable. After all, we expect a transfer of capital to come with terms and conditions, whether that money comes from an employer or a bequest from a deceased grandparent. The question is what form will those terms and conditions take and will they be acceptable to the individual seeking a grant.

The push for open access is one of those prerogatives. Open access declares its support not for the members of the professional society, who may already have access to the society's publications through membership, but for non-members, including people working in adjacent fields. This is a worthy goal, especially in a time when cross-disciplinary work is pursued aggressively, as no

single researcher can be expected to belong to every adjacent society. But it exacts a toll on the society publishing programs themselves. This is not the aim of the funding agencies; it is an unintended consequence.

The irony of all this is that these rivalries are being played out against the backdrop of the for-profit publishers, which have proven themselves to be innovative and adaptive to an evolving environment. It often seems that the arrows launched by library groups against the commercial firms land on the heads of society publishers, which become collateral damage, as it were. Commercial organizations pursue their own interests unself-consciously. Indeed, I think the reason that they have been so successful is that they know precisely what their interests are and pursue them without looking back. There is a lesson here for not-for-profits and professional societies.

So the context we work in today has the professional society surrounded on at least three sides: by libraries, funding organizations, and commercial publishers. The challenge is to find a strategy that reasserts the role of professionals working together on common topics.

The current financial problems for academic libraries may present some unexpected opportunities for society publishing. While no one likes the idea of libraries having less money to spend, this may be the time for developing renewed membership benefits, including new publications and publishing services that are offered exclusively to members. In some respects, societies may wish to look beyond institutional markets and concentrate instead on marketing directly to researchers in the field, a library bypass strategy. This marks the real end of the Maxwell paradigm — not open access, whose benefits are largely to people outside the field, but direct-to-consumer marketing, which serves to strengthen ties among societies and their membership and places the prerogatives of the researchers in a particular discipline above all others.

Just what those new membership services are is a big topic, and the answer will vary society by society, but it should be noted that this is the one area where the professional societies have the advantage over all their rivals. Only the professional societies can assemble comprehensive databases of marketing information on people working in the field, for example, which is a necessary first step in building any kind of direct marketing service. And only the professional societies have their own field of study as their exclusive focus. Marketing to libraries is a shotgun approach, but digital media lends itself to rifle shots.

I am myself optimistic about the future of society publishing, provided that the societies themselves begin to set their own direction and align their programs with their own interests.

About Joseph Esposito

I am a management consultant working primarily in the world of digital media, software, and

publishing. My clients include both for-profits and not-for-profits. A good deal of my activity concerns research publishing, especially when the matter at issue has to do with the migration to digital services from a print background. Prior to setting up my consulting business, I served as CEO of three companies (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Tribal Voice, and SRI Consulting), all of which I led to successful exits. Typically I work on strategy issues, advising CEOs and Boards of Directors on direction; I also have managed a number of sticky turnarounds. Among other things, I have been the recipient of grants from the Mellon, MacArthur, and Hewlett Foundations, all concerning research into new aspects of publishing.

[View all posts by Joseph Esposito »](#)

Discussion

9 thoughts on “Putting Society Publishing in Context”

1. Of course, societies have long sold their mailing lists to publishers as part of their revenue-generating activities. Are you counseling them not to do so anymore since this is an asset that has unique value to them now?

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POSTED BY **SANDY THATCHER** | [JUL 16, 2012, 9:08 AM](#)

2. In an OA society publication, could society dues fund APCs for members, or support lower rates?

Also It is worth noting that the subject focus of societies offers an opportunity to shape community websites and gateways going forward. This is something publishers often try to create de novo from content clustering but in many cases, societies already exist who are ideally placed to do this (if the costs can be covered).

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POSTED BY **CHRIS FELL** | JUL 16, 2012, 10:41 AM

- There's an interesting article on this subject here:

<http://science-and-food.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/wherefore-and-what-from-scientific.html>

Essentially, the author suggests that since APC's come from grant money, while membership dues come from one's personal pocket, most researchers are unwilling to substitute one for the other.

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POSTED BY **DAVID CROTTY** | JUL 16, 2012, 12:19 PM

3. Yes but are these either or choices? Many currently pay membership for the various reasons suggested. Will they continue to do so? 1000 members paying dues of 100 dollars each could support a reasonable publishing infrastructure, if that is what the society saw as its primary role.

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POSTED BY **CHRISFELL51** | JUL 17, 2012, 4:38 AM

- I think this comment is indicative of the general lack of awareness regarding the costs of administering, publishing and marketing (even in an OA world) a mainstream scholarly STEM journal. In addition, because few readers seek the actual journal issues anymore (vs a listing of search term specific article requests), I also think the scale of most respected journals is underestimated by the researcher. A 100K budget – as referred to above – would barely support a few months of publication, even for a start up publication, for any journal with plans to offer a significant contribution to its field.

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POSTED BY **BRANDON NORDIN** | JUL 17, 2012, 10:39 AM

- There's also the question of the role of the society. Does the society exist solely to publish a journal, or is the journal a tool used to fund activities that benefit the research community? If you take all of the member dues and put them toward journal costs, and the journals don't bring in any profits, the society is left with no funds to do the things they're supposed to be doing.

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POSTED BY **DAVID CROTTY** | JUL 17, 2012, 11:27 AM

- David:
Sadly these "business model" issues are frequently viewed as boring (at best), 'filthy lucre' (at worst) by both the host Societies, their members and the institutional library community these journals support!

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POSTED BY **BRANDON NORDIN** | JUL 20, 2012, 4:37 PM

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