

Editorial

Plus ça Change

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It's almost a commonplace remark to say that we are experiencing an unprecedented period of change in the world of scholarly communication in general, and publishing in particular.

Who would gainsay that? Perhaps the creation of the internet and world-wide web triggered things—but of course that was well over 20 years ago. In scholarly publishing, it's easy to tick off obvious developments: electronic journals (and associated 'big deals'), the rise of open access (OA), the incredible rise of social media to name but three. But also development which we might characterize as more 'political' e.g., the push for open access in general and funding mandates in particular. Perhaps also we could cite the 'demonization' of publishers in some quarters, and not just those nefarious types who thought they could exploit the availability of OA funds to create 'predatory' OA journals.

There have been other systemic changes. 'Disintermediation' was a fashionable term in the nineties. Who has been disintermediated? Well, not too many publishers, I would say, although there has been a lot of consolidation amongst the commercial publishers—but also quite a few new ones have appeared. 'Consolidation' doesn't begin to describe what has happened to subscription agents—just about only one global agent left—even the Association of Subscription Agents has shut up shop—a bit tricky to continue when there are hardly any left. Many libraries have not fared too well—so many corporate research libraries have disappeared. Others have had to adapt, and not just by incorporating coffee shops into their premises—new positions have been created, in so-called 'scholarly communication' (which early on seemed indistinguishable from OA advocating), as well as research assessment positions, altmetrics and OA administration.

For some, not only has what they regard as progress been too slow, but they might regard it as almost non-existent. The other day I was reading a joint paper from some of the 'usual suspects' [1] lamenting how the fixed and two-dimensional format of the pdf was still the dominant medium and how this had to change to take advantage of all the potential that is offered by technological development. Then I noticed that this was written in 2011. I imagine the authors are even more frustrated now.

Then, how often have you seen articles itemising the systemic problems that absolutely make it seem impossible that things won't change dramatically? And how long has that been going on? Personally, it's always sobering to recall a pioneering study by Fry and White [2] which charts the decline in subscriptions and library budgets—and realise that was carried out over 40 years ago! Greg Tananbaum did a good job of listing all those factors many years ago (2003) in an article in our rival journal [3], but even more telling was his title 'Of Wolves and Boys'. All those prophets of doom seem to have been confounded, time and again. Even Paul Ginsparg, the founder of the transformative ArXiv, who still thinks major change will occur, admits he's got 'the time constant' (physicists so often like to use terms from their own profession) wrong.

OA is important, and growing. And yet, and yet, talk to the major publishers and for all their investment on OA journals and diversification into new products, the majority of their revenue and profit still comes from subscription journals. The key point Tananbaum reminds us of, however, is that, eventually, one day the boy cried 'wolf', nobody came to help, and the wolf actually came.

I was prompted to all these musings when we accepted a new research paper for this issue by one of the doyens of information research, Carol Tenopir, looking into authors' attitudes to journal publishing. It's in her results that we begin to see the reasons why some aspects of change have been, so some feel, so slow. Authors and researchers are the key people in all this. And what do they think? You'll have to read the article to get the full picture, but what is clear is: not only are journals still vital, but it's their quality that is paramount; perhaps surprisingly, for them OA is not a big deal; one aspect of that, perhaps, is that they are also not concerned about public access or awareness. Their reputation rests in the hands of their peers, and that's what matters. So systems have to cater for that or they seem doomed to failure, and no amount of bemoaning lack of progress in form or function is going to change that. As to why the format itself has changed so little, with for example, so few 3-D or 'living' journals, well that will have to wait for another time.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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