Faculty Attitudes About Scholarly Communication Trends and Issues: Tribal Differences at Columbia University

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Scholarly communication is the creation, evaluation, transmission, and preservation of knowledge. There has been sustained concern over the last thirty years in the academic and research communities about the cost of scholarly publications, the time lags between authorship and publication, rampant consolidation in the publishing industry, the need to assure peer review and quality, the future of the scholarly monograph, the permanent archiving and integrity of the scholarly record, researcher rights and the academic community control of research results, and the survival of the university press and the scholarly society. There are significant and dynamic developments in scholarly communication, involving innovative applications of technology, various new open access business and distribution models, diverse repository movements combined with robust search engine access programs, new approaches to intellectual property management, and major public policy debates affecting scholarly work.

Higher education faculty attitudes about these trends and issues have generally been viewed as monolithic, not reflective of the extraordinary differences in understanding, interest, and aspirations across and within academic disciplines. In order to better understand these scholarly tribal distinctions, the Columbia University Libraries conducted during the 2004 and 2005 academic years a series of focus group discussions with faculty in thirty-five departments in the School of Arts and Sciences and the School of Engineering. The goal was to gather qualitative knowledge about disciplinary variations in scholarly communication practices, priorities and projections about future developments.

Each departmental focus group session was initiated by the Office of the University Librarian through the chair of the academic unit. In some cases, time was allotted in the agenda of a regularly scheduled faculty meeting, and in other cases, a special meeting was convened to focus on the scholarly communication topic. The library participants included the university librarian, the director of collection development for the libraries, and the subject librarian assigned to work with the academic department. In most cases, only departmental faculty participated, but doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers, and visiting scholars were also in attendance. No materials were distributed prior to the meeting. A general announcement on the nature and purpose of the discussion was circulated to all departmental faculty.

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At each focus group session, the university librarian or director of collection development provided a brief orientation to the key issues to be discussed. An agenda of these topics with supporting documents was distributed as references and as take-away materials. Each departmental discussion proceeded through the agenda with provocative questions to promote discussion and debate. In addition, at each session, the subject librarian handed out and discussed a chart which reflected library collection trends in the discipline, with information on price increases for selected scholarly journals and with updates on major electronic content investments. The topics covered included the following:

• the challenges libraries are facing in building collections in support of student and faculty needs,

• the challenges that publishers are facing under impact of economic and technological developments,

• the challenges that scholars are facing under the impact of the volume of information being produced and the need to build a strong publishing record,

• the economic trends affecting scholarly communication and publishing,

• the debates about the ownership of the scholarly record,

• the national policy developments around copyright and open access to funded research,

• the future of the scholarly journal,

• the future of the scholarly monograph,

• the role and vitality of the scholarly societies,

• the nature and relevance of scholarly repositories, and

• ways that the library can best work with the faculty to support more effectively their scholarly work.

The discussions in the various academic departments did not always proceed systematically through these topics, as disciplinary interests and individual faculty concerns drove the conversations down various paths.

The various faculty discussions generated a set of observations which cut across the disciplines, and these include the following:

• Scholarly publishing issues are not seen as the "library problem" but are being widely, and sometimes passionately, discussed across the disciplines;

• There is a consistent concern about the economics and the survival of the scholarly book that serves different but important functions in the disciplines;

• The expanding discussion of subventions and subsidies to underwrite scholarly work is a significant concern, either as open access or page charges or as compensation for declining markets for specialized works;

• The impact of the market for scholarly work is having a noteworthy and what is perceived as a negative impact on individual scholar choice of topic, level of treatment, and use of illustrative or supplementary materials;

• The coexistence of print and electronic versions of the same work is seen as interim condition particularly because of the growing importance of linking, multimedia and interactive tools;

• There is wide embracing of the value and functionality of electronic information useable over the network, but disappointment that the digitization of historical scholarly work is not progressing;

• What role will the search engines play in expanding effective access to scholarly work;

• A key observation in all disciplines is that quality equals content plus functionality, that is what can be done with the information and the tools, and how will this influence the ways scholars collect and present their evidence;

• There is recognition of the various repositories that are increasingly capturing, providing access to, and archiving the scholarly record, including disciplinary, institutional, school/department, individual, national, learning, media, research data repositories;

• There is recognition of the importance of grey literature in many fields and new forms of scholarly work in the use of digital and network technologies;

• Open access as a business and national information policy matter is not widely understood, but there is a recognition of the growing economic, legal and technology barriers to appropriate educational and scholarly access;

• The fundamental importance of quality control/peer review and impact assessment was routinely affirmed;

• Long-term archiving is affirmed as important, but the understanding of the financial, technological, and legal elements is unclear; and

• Faculty retention of copyright, ownership of their work, to assign as appropriate must be sustained.

The various faculty discussions across the disciplines also generated a series of provocative questions about the history, current state, and future of scholarly communication:

• Have the publication prices for scholarly work gone down? Why?

• Are research results circulating more quickly? How?

• Are institutions or individual scholars asserting some control over their intellectual property?

• Has academic publisher consolidation been reduced? And what is the documented impact of these market changes?

• Have we been able to manage the continuing expansion in the number of scholarly journals and the quantity objective for scholarly work?

• Are researcher and academic administrators talking more about scholarly publishing issues and with what impact?

• Is open access a viable alternative to publisher-based and license-accessed scholarly work?

• In the absence of a coordinated plan for archiving of digital publications, will the scholarly record survive?

• Is open access a threat to peer review and the integrity of the scholarly record?

• Are editorial boards of scholarly journals and academic presses willing to look at new access and distribution models?

• Will fair use of scholarly work survive the ongoing legislative and legal battles?

• Will scholarly communication be embraced as an important public policy and institutional policy issue?

There was a common, but varied, view across the disciplines in terms of the explanation of the "urge to publish," why the scholars at our universities are so active as researchers. Publication is seen as the primary tool for the communication of ideas and research results. Communication is a fundamental aspect of the academic culture, it is what faculty members have been "raised" to do. Publication is the strategy for the preservation of ideas, and for individual and institutional prestige and recognition. The norms of scholarly work were consistently confirmed across the disciplines: the open and free exchange of ideas, publication in scholarly outlets, meritocracy, organized skepticism, and common or community ownership of scholarly goods.

Having focused on some of the key consistent observations across the disciplines, it is also important to identify some examples of the key "tribal" differences, which are outlined below:

• The science research community is clearly more focused on research data capture, curation, and archiving, though this is also beginning to touch social science and humanities fields;

• The science research community is more active and more dependent on disciplinary repositories as the primary tool of communication;

• The science research community is far more concerned about the impact of changes on the health of scholarly societies;

• The science research community is far more concerned about the influence of federal funding agencies on the direction and nature of scholarly work;

• The science research community is more prone to multi-authored and global research teams cutting across different scholarly communication traditions;

• The humanities research community is far more concerned about the impact of changes on the university press and small scholarly press communities;

• The humanities research community is more inclined to turn to scholarly publishers outside the U.S.;

• The humanities research community still has concerns about the quality of electronic-only journals;

• The humanities research community is exploring strategies for de-emphasizing the monograph for tenure purposes;

• The social science research community finds the ability to incorporate media and research data into the online presentation increasingly critical;

• The social science research community continues to require both book and research paper publishing for faculty advancement

Perhaps the most noteworthy illustration of the important differences observed within a discipline came out of the discussions with the computer science department. Some faculty indicated that only current, that is last year specialized computer science research papers and technical reports, were of interest; a second group emphasized the importance of literature across the science disciplines; another group stressed the importance of access to policy literature affecting technology; and a fourth group focuses heavily on the mathematical and philosophy literature of the nineteenth century.

It is important for academic librarians to engage their faculties in energetic discussions about key developments and trends in scholarly publishing. It is critical that the librarians take away from these interactions a deep appreciation and understanding of the diversity of needs, expectations, and interests and the varying responses to changes in policy and practice. The "tribal" nature of the academy defines its vitality and its reality.