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SSP's Annual Meeting: Advancing Scholarly Communities in the Brave 'Now' World

Text and photos

by DONALD T. HAWKINS

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SSP's Annual Meeting: Advancing Scholarly Communities in the Brave 'Now' World

Text and photos by DONALD T. HAWKINS

More than 600 editors, publishers, writers, and other information professionals gathered in Baltimore in late May for the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP) annual meeting.

REPORT FROM THE FIELD

While attendance was lower than last year's record-setting 700, the turnout was similar to other recent SSP meetings. The general mood was positive, which is encouraging in these tumultuous economic times. While scholarly publishing is changing rapidly and dramatically, the presentations followed the often familiar themes of marketing, technology, and publishing strategies/business models.

Science and Publishing

After acknowledging our current moment in history with its abounding geopolitical and financial crises, opening keynoter Adam Bly, founder and CEO of Seed Media Group, LLC and editor-in-chief of *Seed*, said science is the key to sustained economic growth and stability in the 21st century. Science is not just a business investment; it has the potential to transform the world. Publishers have a responsibility to promote science by disseminating knowledge. And by understanding and listening to scientists, we can begin to understand the forces acting on our industry and move forward.

Science is not a closed system; it is porous as it interacts with the arts, literature, and culture. According to Bly, 65% of scientists cite literature, 73% of them recognize world affairs, and 63% say that politics has an influence on their work. More than 60% of scientists are involved in at least one international collaboration.

Scientists care about social issues and can become a powerful force for change. They have a growing expectation of open access to information, and most of them believe that their publications should be freely available to their colleagues and the

public. Many scientists are taking proactive steps to make this possible by posting research results on their websites and using blogs to connect with their peers.

Bly said that at this time of massive change, we have the opportunity to redefine our industry based on a new generation of innovators. A wholesale revolution of the publishing industry is needed. He identified the following measures as important:

- We must have a core of digital information, not just digital accessories or tools.
- Nothing we do should limit the advancement of science. Information needs to flow freely.
- The developing world needs to be connected to countries that are already developed; a new framework for intellectual property rights needs to allow easy global collaboration.
- Knowledge needs to be extracted from information and a new language of communication needs to be fostered to move to a new level of information literacy.
- Scientists pursue truth and will go to great lengths to find it; publishers need to provide the information and resources they need.

"We need science today more than ever before," said Bly, "and we need the hallmarks of curiosity and creativity of scientists. We cannot be the limiting factor to discovery. The world relies on scientists, and they rely on us. We must not let them down."

Publishing for the Google Generation

A session on publishing for the Google Generation drew a large audience. Vikram Savkar, publishing director at the Nature Publishing Group (NPG), said we all are part of the Google Generation in a sense,

but the term generally refers to those under 25 because of the deep impact that the internet has had on them and how they think about content. To succeed, publishers must change and adapt their policies to the major drivers of change today, including search engines (as gatekeepers to



Charles Lowry, executive editor of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL)

information), crowdsourced content (as a collective whole such as Wikipedia), and access to free information.

Savkar pointed to success stories: Facebook, which has turned millions of students into publishers; YouTube and Twitter, which have made information short and punchy; and email and instant messaging, which have added a social velocity to information.

Some traditional publishers are also attracting the Google Generation: Lectures by professors from six major universities can be found on Academic Earth (<http://academicearth.org>); WileyPLUS (www.wileyplus.com) is an integrated suite of resources for education that includes textbooks, homework management tools, and presentation resources; and Scitable (www.nature.com/scitable) is an open source online teaching portal containing articles authored by NPG writers.

The Google Generation is exercising its information choices, and publishers need to be proactive in connecting to them. Carefully prepared content is critical; publishers cannot just put old content online. Publishers can develop content effectively for this generation through market research and including representatives of the generation in any and all strategic discussions.

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Market Big, Spend Small

Social media and collaboration are keys to helping publishers market their products effectively in times of economic change. Social networking systems have few entry barriers and reach a wide audience, providing significant exposure at little cost.

For example, organizations could put marketing videos on YouTube, post podcasts along with journal articles, add a society account to Twitter and use it for announcements of publications and events, use a blog (which may be a new form of press release) to post summaries of new books or journal articles, or create a wiki to promote a journal as an expert source and build the organization's reputation. Creating a Facebook page can reach members of the younger generation who do not visit publisher websites regularly.

Collaboration can also reduce marketing costs by letting publishers reach new markets and share booth space at conventions or by reaching out to countries where their products are not well-known. Publishers and societies can make their websites work for them by using news alerts and RSS feeds to promote their products.

New Publishing Models

The popular session titled *Brave Adventures: New Publishing Models for the "Now" World* featured Kent Anderson, executive director of international business and product development at *The New England Journal of Medicine*, and Geoffrey Bilder, director of strategic initiatives at CrossRef. Anderson and Bilder, well-known publishing industry experts, are frequent speakers at industry conferences.

Anderson noted that information is abundant, but the legacy of publishers is based on a model of scarcity of content, distribution, and creators. Today, information ownership does not bestow power. Instead, it may be an impediment because it can withhold the movement we need to move ahead. While information used to be hoarded, those days are rapidly disappearing. Most people now publish or will do so soon, but information still needs context to guide users about ways to use it and tell them why it is important. Anderson introduced the concept of *apomediation* or "mediating around" (see

<http://p2pfoundation.net/Apomediation> for more details).

When information was scarce, users needed intermediaries to find data. But in a world of apomediation, agents stand by to guide users to information that they can retrieve themselves, letting users have easier access to the content and giving the data authority. So in Anderson's opinion, content is no longer king; readers are being democratized and royalty is being dethroned. Systems such as Twitter have become buzzwords, blogs have grown tremendously (they are web-native publishing), and the real-time web is emerging. Anderson suggests that publishers find ways to produce materials for long tail consumption by building platforms for devices instead of publications. But fixed costs will undoubtedly increase, leading to smaller profit margins.

Bilder's scathing indictment of the publishing industry pointed fingers at publishers who he said were doing a poor job getting content to the right audience. He characterized the publishing industry as being afraid of cannibalizing its physical sales and being slow to innovate in online sales and cooperate with each other on standards. Likewise, they are also seen as profiteering and afraid because their customers are starting to distribute content for free.

Bilder noted that publishers and libraries are seen as conspiring to "annoy" users because they make it harder for users to find content. Two reports illustrate this problem: "How Readers Navigate to Scholarly Content" (www.sic.ox14.com/howreadersnavigatoscholarlycontent.pdf) and "E-Journals: Their Use, Value, and Impact" (www.rin.ac.uk/use-ejournals).

Oftentimes, publishers do not know who their users are and do not know where 90% of their web traffic comes from, according to Bilder. He used Apple's iTunes as an example for the publishing industry: It has critical mass, pricing is basic and cheap, the interface is simple, and purchasing is a one-click operation. Perhaps this could serve as a model for an "iPub" application.

Brand and user trust are a publisher's main assets. People use brands to filter content, but it is getting harder to pay attention to all the new forms of content. Perhaps publishers could sell subscriptions to our trust mark and not the content.

Publishers and Libraries: An ARL Report

In the second-day plenary address, Charles Lowry, Association of Research Libraries (ARL) executive director, discussed a survey of members of the ARL. Since research libraries are facing the most difficult fiscal management problems in history, it is imperative to find innovative ways to work together. Settling down will only lead to a broad decline of the mission of the research library, and



The tag cloud depicts key terms in the ARL survey report.

the next 18 months will be a true test. Libraries need to establish their credibility, which is not easy. Many libraries are expected to reduce information access due to the combined pressures of inflation and budget restrictions. The full report is available at www.arl.org/bm~doc/transformational-times.pdf.

Outside the Meeting

The closing panel members summarized their thoughts about the meeting, and several of them commented on Twitter and collaboration. Adam Weiss, a podcasting consultant, said he thought the publishing industry was in major trouble before the meeting, but he has become more optimistic after hearing that people are talking about the right things. His advice was simple: Just do it faster. To him, the most exciting thing about the meeting was what happened outside of it: More than 1,000 Twitter posts were tagged with #SSP09.

The 2010 SSP meeting will be held June 2–4 in San Francisco.

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