Forum / Tribune

Towards Change: Continuing the Conversation on Electronic Publishing

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Abstract

In a previous Forum article (Conrad, 2002), survey results on the perceived acceptance of moving the *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education* (*CJUCE*) closer to an e-publishing format were presented. These results and the ensuing discussion highlighted important issues associated with e-publishing formats based on the perspectives of the *CJUCE* readership. This paper extends that discussion to include a look at overcoming existing criticisms of the peer-review process, current changes in university library holdings, and perspectives of the contributors with respect to e-journal formats.

Résumé

Dans un article antérieur du Forum (Conrad, 2002), on présenta des résultats d'un sondage basé sur l'approbation présumée des membres sur l'approchement de la *Revue canadienne de l'éducation permanente universitaire (RCÉPU)* à un format électronique. Tout en se basant sur les perspectives des lecteurs de la *RCÉPU*, ces résultats et discussions consécutifs ont mis en évidence des questions importantes se rattachant aux formats électroniques. Dans cet article, cette discussion s'étend pour inclure et pour surmonter des critiques actuelles visant le processus de la révision des pairs, les changements actuels aux fonds de bibliothèques universitaires, et les perspectives des collaborateurs en ce qui concerne les formats électroniques.

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Introduction

The Forum piece, "Electronic Publishing, Scholarly Communication, and the *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*" (Conrad, 2002), began by outlining the debate over electronic publishing. Although it is hard to imagine, this debate began well over a decade ago. In 1991, for example, Harrison, Stephen, and Winter presented a prima facie case for the change to electronic scholarly journals. They cited the advantages of e-publishing as speed of dissemination, lower production costs, higher accessibility, and greater interconnectedness between databases for accessible archives.

Early advocates of e-journals, however, failed to recognize that an academic journal's move to an electronic presence is dependent upon two factors. The success (or failure) of such a move depends on the extent to which an electronic presence is consistent with the practices of the discipline it serves and whether or not it reflects the contributors' and readers' needs, resources, and skills for accessing electronic information and communication. Thus, before making a decision to move a journal to an electronic presence, it is important to investigate the views of a discipline's social practices, as was done by the editor of *CJUCE* (Conrad, 2002).

Journals as Hallmarks of the Academy

The peer-reviewed article has been the hallmark of quality, credibility, and acceptability for academic researchers for over 300 years. The status of peer-reviewed journals has risen within the academy—not because the process is a foolproof means to ensure that the publication is reliable, rigorous, and extends or creates new knowledge—but because the alternatives have been less than satisfactory. Most of us recognize and accept the need for the peer-review process. Yet, from our own experiences, we know it can be a convoluted and lengthy procedure that requires diplomacy and negotiating skills on the part of the editor, contributions of time and critical insight by reviewers, and demonstrations of perseverance and humility by authors.

Peer-reviewed journal publications have been criticized on many counts. One specific criticism is that the process is too limited and controlling—with only two to three experts in the area reviewing a manuscript. It is also seen to be closed and often secretive (only the editor knows all the players in the review process); consequently, acceptance can be arbitrary and biased with an inherent conservatism. Contributing to this criticism are situations in which editors may not have large pools of talented reviewers to provide critical reviews containing appropriate, constructive, and practical feedback. A related criticism targets those reviewers who, firmly entrenched in traditional academia, reject innovative research that explores new paradigms.

A frequently expressed criticism is that the process is slow. From the initial submission, the manuscript review process typically takes anywhere from three weeks to six months—and can take up to a year (or longer!) if the author is asked to revise and resubmit. It is not uncommon for the process, from submission to press, to take as long as two years.

In spite of these criticisms, it would be difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff with respect to the quality and significance of published research without the peer- review process.

Confronting the Criticisms

It is possible that many of the criticisms levelled at academic journals could be eliminated with Web-based publishing. Until relatively recently, paper-based, peer-reviewed journals were the main venue for researchers' scholarly publishing. As the Web emerged as a platform for publications, early adopters of Internet technology in academe quickly recognized that there might be advantages in using the Internet for scholarly publications. Today, the Internet provides an assortment and range of platforms for the production and dissemination of peer-reviewed publications.

Without question, the use of the Internet has increased the speed of the review process. The use of e-mail, rather than postal services, reduces the time considerably (from two to six weeks). The move from a paper to an electronic submission process by the Royal Society of Chemistry academic journal, for example, resulted in a significant decrease in time from manuscript submission to publication. This journal reported a reduced production time, from 100 days to 40 days, as a result of using an electronic publication process (Wilkenson, 2000). Moreover, journals that continue to use postal services are left at a distinct disadvantage in that many researchers who submit manuscripts want their work published in a timely manner and will select journals that have a reasonable "turn around time." This leaves journals that rely on postal services with missed opportunities for publishing significant research papers.

To counter criticism that review processes are conservative and culturally biased, many academic journals recognize that an international readership is essential for survival. In response, they offer research articles with a diversity of perspectives and inclusiveness. A journal with international readership also has the ability to draw contributors with significant research history, as well as those who wish to have their study read by an international audience. Many journals capitalize on this opportunity by publishing both paper and Web-based versions.

Libraries have also responded to the change from paper to electronic platforms, in particular, by moving from print-based holdings to electronic

holdings. Moreover, increased readership resulting from e-publishing does not just reflect an increase in an international readership. At the University of Calgary, for example, students and faculty not only use electronic journals but also embrace them. In the past year, readership increased by 49%; faculty and students accessed electronic journals 164,123 times—an average of 5,478 accesses a day. As Andrew Waller, the Serial Collections Librarian at the University of Calgary (quoted in The University of Calgary *Gazette*, 2003) pointed out, one benefit of electronic journals is that they never wear out:

> The two most popular electronic journals were searched for articles well over 2,000 times in the last six months; if you throw in table of content searches it's up to 3,000 … A print journal accessed 2,000 times would be falling apart.

Large suites of electronic journals from academic publishers are now accessible to university libraries. These include Wiley Interscience, Kluwer Online, Elsevier's ScienceDirect, Emerald Fulltext, and the Oxford University Press (OUP). The Emerald collection consists of over 100 journals, and the OUP collection has over 150 journals.

Although some parts of the world experience Internet access difficulties, many of us reap enormous benefits from the dissemination of free information on the Web. The ability to retrieve a journal from a desktop computer—especially for those who do not have easy access to a library or whose libraries do not have adequate holdings—provides a significant increase in access. The availability of archives on the Internet increases researchers' abilities to locate and access research, and also ensures that new research projects build on prior research, thereby reducing the number of duplicate studies.

Another benefit of publishing on the Web is citation linking throughout online journal literature. Journals that are available on the Web permit other bibliographic references to be cited through the use of hypertext links. Readers who want to refer to the original source can easily and quickly access it through a hypertext link, which makes the links nearly as valuable as the content of the paper itself.

McKerrow, Wood, and Smith (1995) also claim that an esoteric advan tage of e-publications in hypertext format is the capacity to question the epistemological assumptions of scholarly communication. They observed that "this opening of the text represents an opportunity to reassert that sense of scholarship being a collegial exchange, rather than received knowledge from expert opinion." The *Academic Exchange Quarterly* (http://www.rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/), for example, has used the Web to make the review process more open and collegial. This journal offers contributors the choice to submit manuscripts online and the ability to track the review process through a Web page. If the reviewers' recommendations are

to revise and resubmit the manuscript, an online mentor is available to help the author(s) with the revision process.

A more extreme and interactive example of using the Web to provide a fully open and collegial review process is the *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* (*JIME*) (http://www-jime.open.ac.uk). *JIME* uses an open review process that is designed to be responsive and dynamic. Underpinning the *JIME* process are the assumptions that: (1) contributors have the right of reply; (2) reviewers are named and accountable for their comments, and their contributions are acknowledged; and (3) the wider research community has the chance to shape a submission before publication. Thus, these assumptions create a process that includes opportunity for input from the reviewers, readers, and contributors before final publication.

Towards Change

In addition to presenting the results of the survey on the perceived acceptance of moving *CJUCE* closer to an e-publishing format, the Fall 2002 Forum article raised a discussion about the value of publishing in online journals among readers of *CJUCE*. The results of the opinion survey revealed that very few readers (21%) access it online. Similar opinion surveys indicate that many academic journal readers feel that electronically published journals do not offer the permanence, or the prestige, of traditional paper journals (Sweeney, 2000).

We are presently in an era where the publishing industry is being revolutionized by the Internet (Cameron, 2001), with the greatest impact being on academic journal publishing. According to Cameron, "The Internet has probably had a greater effect on the journal publishing industry than any other, and the effects have probably affected it more quickly." Indeed, it is likely that academic journal publications will radically transform format and standards as the Internet acquires the imprimatur of scholarly legitimacy (Harrison, Stephen, & Winter, 1991).

During this time of transformation, gathering readership opinion is no doubt a necessary process. This opinion, however, is only one aspect to consider when making a decision to move an academic journal from a paper to an electronic format. As noted by Conrad in the Forum article, scholarly journals are for the contributors and by the contributors. Thus, a move by *CJUCE* to e-publishing should depend on the extent to which this format is consistent with the need of the contributors it serves and the extent to which it reflects their demand for the communication and dissemination of new knowledge.

As a small but national journal, *CJUCE* should consider that a journal with international readership, which can be accomplished through a

Web-based platform, has the ability to draw significant contributions from researchers who want an international audience for their work. The implications of this alone should be compelling enough to justify a serviceable Web presence for an educational journal.

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Biography

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Heather Kanuka est directrice adjointe des Communes des apprenants à The University of Calgary. Elle est aussi professeur adjoint à la Faculté d'éducation à The University of Calgary. Ses intérêts de recherche comprennent la téléformation en ligne ainsi que l'apprentissage à distance s'insérant à l'intérieur des paramètres de l'éducation supérieure.