

THE PROCESS OF SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION: THE STATE OF THE ART - A LEARNED SOCIETY PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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Paper presented at the Third European Serials Conference, Ireland, September 1996

This presentation reflects on scholarly communication within the learned society sector taking the Regional Studies Association as a case study. It reviews the traditional forms of working of the Association and its responses to readily available technologies via the Internet and World Wide Web, and why the Association has embraced the use of some aspects of technology but drawn back from moving rapidly down the electronic publishing route. Drawing on the experiences of two other learned societies which are taking part in different pilot projects in this area, it will argue that for many learned societies a prudent approach would be wise, but that it is necessary to monitor the potential of this technology in improving benefits to members.

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Introduction

The rejection of new technology, even temporarily, is a dangerous thing and should not be done lightly. The Regional Studies Association has been a learned society for 33 years. We were established to increase knowledge in our field, to disseminate it and, through this process, we aim to set standards of practice. We have around 800 members, made up of 23% corporate bodies, 67% individuals and 10% students.

We own the journal *Regional Studies* and publish a newsletter - *Regions*, and a book series with Jessica Kingsley Publishers - *Regional Policy and Development*. We engage in all the conventional activities of a learned society such as running conferences and seminars; we provide funding for working groups, coordinate a European wide database and network of researchers and run a number of branches. Lately the Association has embraced electronic or e-mail as a form of improved communication and has designed and posted its home pages on the World Wide Web. But, it has not run down the path of electronic publishing. Why not? Before I try to explain this let me first make a disclaimer.

Disclaimer

Our Association is not operating at the limits of technology or even close to this. I recently heard a presentation from one of the senior staff of the British Computer Society and they worried that they were not 'state of the art'. The Regional Studies Association is, however, exploiting technology in the same way as many larger societies and I think it is fair to say that we are a reasonable representation of where most small to medium-sized learned societies are.

Electronic publishing

Why has the Regional Studies Association decided not to produce an electronic version of *Regional Studies*? Members of our Publishing Committee were initially enthusiastic about the idea. It would surely save money; printing costs would be reduced; it may increase revenue; our members and readers would have desktop access to the journal. We could offer our members search

facilities by key words, strings of words, country, author, anything. Surely the publisher could arrange for the whole back run to be scanned without difficulty?

It sounded too good to be true, and it was. I have overstated the naivety of the Association's trustees but you get the general idea. This is exciting technology and it is becoming available at the desktop. But there are commercial and practical considerations to take into account.

We have several reasons for adopting a cautious approach. The first is the potential threat to our membership. This is a factor which would only affect membership journals but has important and far-reaching consequences for the learned societies involved.

The threat to membership

The threat varies depending on the type of licensing arrangement envisaged for the electronic journal and on the structure of the society. Learned societies are not a homogenous group. We operate with a membership base who, under the terms of our royalty-based publishing agreement, receive a 'free' copy of our journal and the publisher attracts library subscriptions. Our publisher offered a university all-site licence. This would mean that academics, students and visitors could access copies of *Regional Studies* at any terminal on the library network anywhere on the university campus.

This caused us concern because we anticipated an immediate drop in the number of departmental and student memberships. Departmental libraries usually have stretched budgets and would be unlikely to pay for print versions of material that would be available at terminals within the department. Students, we thought, would be pleased to save their annual membership costs and still have convenient access to the journal.

Any falling off in the membership of a society will, in time, jeopardise its existence. A fall in membership threatens our critical forum for discussion and debate and a fall in income would mean a downsizing of activities in the conference, networking and policy commentary areas, and force us back to the primary role of producing the journal. Therefore, if one accepts that learned societies play a key role in scientific

endeavour and are worth keeping, and that university all-site licences would result in falling membership, then in order to sustain membership and income the society would have to think of ways to offer increased or repackaged benefits.

As it stands today, the main benefit offered by most learned societies is their journal. They would have to consider ways of adding value to membership to make up for the journal's more ready availability. Options open to societies include conventional benefits such as hotel deals, book discount schemes and so on, but more exciting are ideas harnessing the power of the Web, for establishing virtual clubs, for increasing access to relevant material through the expertise of site editors or Web masters. Another attractive option would be to offer an enhanced brokerage role between research partners perhaps through members-only access to searchable online databases.

The development of such enhancement of benefits would take time, expertise and money as well as clear thinking about the value that would be attached by members to the new services. The question of revenue also caused the Association concern.

Revenue

Learned Societies in the UK were warned in February of this year by Professor Bernard Donovan, Secretary General of the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP), to prepare for a fall in serials income.

The general reasons for this were threefold:

- Firstly, that library income (particularly in the UK and USA) is falling. The result is a squeeze on existing subscriptions meaning smaller print runs which in turn leads to rising prices and increasing cancellations.
- Secondly, that there is a trend in the UK for networked journal subscriptions among library groups. An increase in inter-library copying was also hinted at.
- Thirdly, sales might be affected by the Higher Education Funding Council for England Site Licence scheme under trial, whereby a small number of publishers provide all their journals to all institutions at a discount. The encouragement of bulk

orders from large publishers might discourage orders from smaller companies.

More specifically ALPSP has speculated that electronic publishing will affect cash flow for learned societies. This is because with a print version the income comes usually at the beginning of the year with the subscribers paying in advance for unseen information, whereas with e-versions the cushion of income could be lost as readers pay as they go and do not pay for unwanted information.

Disenfranchisement

Trustees are concerned about inequality of access to the Internet, particularly when that might relate to what is currently the major benefit of membership. They accept however that this position is changing.

- If *Regional Studies* adopted the pricing strategy offered to us, of the same cost for print and e-version with a 10%-30% additional levy for both, there was concern that only richer institutions could afford it. We currently have flat rates for different membership categories.
- Speed of access to the Web - most UK academics now have fast ISDN lines and they are online at their desk, but significant numbers of our membership will have slower dial-up links, and some will have no access at all.
- We have noted inequality of access geographically. One colleague from former East Germany has only one terminal with Internet access for his school and it is located in the central library, ten minutes walk from his office. For him, coping with e-mail communication is currently difficult and it will be some time before he would have sufficient machine access time to benefit from electronic versions of our journal.
- Many of our members have their costs, such as telephone call time, met by their institutions but others have to meet their own calls and other costs, which, with slower links, can mount up.
- Access also seems to vary by institution. Most academics have good links but much

of our membership is non-academic, rather consultancy or policy based. Our Association tries to break down barriers between groups and is concerned that non-academics have less access to the Internet.

All of these points would become more important if there were to be value added to e-versions through, for example, pre-publication with the chance for readers to comment on draft articles before final publication.

We also examined issues of cost and pricing.

Costs and pricing

We originally thought that electronic versions might save money. Then we realised that any savings on printing would probably be absorbed by the cost of the process of making e-versions available. Also, the savings would not be ours since the journal would still go through the normal processes of submission, refereeing, editing and copy-editing.

We were also alert (thanks to our e-mail usage) to the possibility that our members might balk at the cost of printing articles from the electronic version in terms of toner, paper, telephone calls and, more importantly, computer and printer time, which can be considerable. Some of the technical aspects of the process also gave us some cause for concern.

Technical aspects

Regional Studies

Regional Studies is an A4-sized publication with a double column layout and includes many maps, tables, diagrams and, occasionally, photographs. Our publishers use real page software whereby the e-version exactly duplicates the print version and would print out on a 'what you see is what you get' basis. Judging by what we saw it would be very difficult to read *Regional Studies* on screen, although it would be open to us to redesign the layout.

There can, as in e-mail, be problems of system compatibility and not everyone uses the Netscape browser. We wish *Regional Studies* to be equally well presented on all systems. The incompatibility of browsers already gives some problems in Web page design.

Archiving

We have also been aware of the discussions, mainly between publishers and librarians, on archiving difficulties. As a learned society our concern is to ensure the maximum exposure of the work published under our imprint.

We were aware of debate about use of CD-ROMs for archiving and the limited life span of these in comparison with paper; of the problems that librarians face in providing a sufficient number of machines to meet reader demand; and of the dangers of current technology becoming obsolete and future readers not coping with the disks of today. We were concerned about the nature of licence being granted to institutions where the access is online. How will access to back-copies be offered if they have discontinued their subscription?

We were also worried about failure rates in high-tech firms if archiving becomes their responsibility.

Contractual and legal matters

There are contractual matters that need development. The original version of our new publishing contract, very recently negotiated, contained clauses allowing e-publishing but made no reference to the Association's rights in respect of back copies of e-versions, while treatment of print versions was fully covered.

In operating at the forefront of new technologies it pays to take care over details and to be as well informed as possible.

A more general point is security. Would it be possible to prevent non-members or subscribers getting access and how would they be traced, and what about policing unauthorised photocopying?

Learned society management factors

A big problem for many learned societies is the size of their head office. Many have no paid staff at all and, where there are staff, it would be unusual to find the mixture of technical and publishing expertise to advise with confidence on these new technologies. The difficulty in gathering information is, I suspect, part of the reason for lower levels of enthusiasm than firms selling this technology would wish for. We are

very fortunate in having publishers who are abreast of technology, expert in their field and flexible in their approach.

Also, trustees of learned societies with successful international journals with high citation counts, like ours, are normally very concerned with quality issues. They feel peer pressure and it can make them risk averse - they would like some certainty of success in new ventures. Of course when, as in most cases, the annual budget is finely balanced this is no bad thing.

Case studies

We are now beginning to get feedback from learned societies who are gaining practical experience under various pilot schemes being run. One society, funded jointly by the JISC and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, has three-year funding to set up a new electronic journal with no parallel print version. They are offering the journal free for this period. The first issue was published in Spring 1996. The second has just come out containing only three articles.

Low submissions will partly reflect the problems establishing any new journal but their Director has noticed 'technology reluctance' coming into play. Some members have queried how articles published electronically will be viewed for the UK Research Assessment Exercise. The society has now recorded a more positive attitude to the initiative among younger members and new entrants. They have noted that few academics in their social science discipline are using the Internet technologies and identify the need for training as a key issue for the future. When we enquired if they would extend into e-versions for their established print journals they said, "not for some time" and gave difficulties in setting prices as a major factor.

However, the British Psychological Society (also with external funding) is experimenting with electronically publishing their established print journal, *British Journal of Psychology*. They aim to pre-publish on the Web and invite comment which will be attached as an e-mail type commentary to the articles.

Our publication contract contains a clause permitting development in the electronic arena

but for the moment the Association is happy with its decision to monitor progress in this area.

Trustees of *Regional Studies* are asking fundamental questions. Do people want e-versions? Most members of our committees want to retain the print version. They would welcome electronic search facilities but would not be in favour of any pre-publication scheme which would delay final publication. They speculate that electronic versions better suit scientific or data heavy disciplines. They are discouraged by initial (hard to get hold of) sales figures for e-versions. They doubt that members would pay a premium on their membership for an e-version.

So, are we Luddites? I don't think so. We have embraced other aspects of Internet technology.

E-mail

We make fairly full use of e-mail. It has made a substantial difference to the way in which we work particularly in terms of meetings and liaison between small decision-making groups, such as our branch committees. Careful use of e-mail has reduced the number of physical meetings that we hold and has improved decision-making because information is more freely exchanged before them.

It is a discipline to remember to retain an 'audit' trail on important decisions. Also the technology is annoyingly imperfect. For example, members on different browsers cannot always access attachments to documents and can lose formatting of tables. One worrying thing is that a number of members who were enthusiastic about the expanded use of e-mail in our work are now complaining that the receipt of lengthy papers or reports to review means their printer is busy for a long time, and they (or their institutions) have to bear the cost.

Mailing lists - listservs

We are also moving towards use of listservs. The records of members' addresses are held centrally. Members of the listserv can mail messages to everyone on the list. We find it a superb way to reach a large number of people in a specialist field - members usually self-select to

be part of the list and on the lists in which we are involved there is active debate, although there is work to be done in attracting non-academics to join in. There are also decisions to make in terms of the number of lists, levels of specialisation, open access or invited and so on.

Web sites

We have also recently established our Web site. We hope to attract a good number of non-member visitors, but in preparation for pressure on journal sales and income we are discussing the development of the site so that it enhances current membership benefits. We wish to offer:

- increased networking possibilities for members;
- increased access to the latest news from the Association, such as new appointments, jobs on offer and so on;
- a rudimentary form of searchable database for member access to our European database, in a partnership with other societies.

We are hoping to develop increased contact between different sections of membership using the Web site. We now receive several requests for further information each week and have recruited a small number of new activists.

Conclusion

Richard Charikin, Chief Executive of the Current Science Group, a major player in setting up academic and practice web 'clubs', has suggested to me that our Association would lose the race by not getting involved with the technology right away. I and my colleagues prefer the story of the race between the hare and the tortoise. That is, you do not have to be in the lead except as you cross the finishing line. There is no automatic penalty for not being first with the technology - a high quality journal will still be sought out by authors seeking a vehicle for publication and by readers keen to stay abreast of new ideas. The trick is to get your timing right. We hope that by monitoring closely the experience of other societies and by keeping up with technological developments in journals publication, we will be able to successfully harness the power of this new technology at the appropriate time.