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BOOK REVIEW

Current Models of Digital Scholarly Communication: results of an investigation conducted by Ithaka for the Association of Research Libraries

Nancy L. Maron and K. Kirby Smith

Washington, DC, Association of Research Libraries, 2008, 49 pp.

Online only: <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/current-models-report.pdf>

This report has arisen from ARL's desire to understand how the academic community are using digital communication tools. In particular it aims to identify innovative deployments in the online environment. The target audience is broad, incorporating librarians, scholars, campus or association leaders and anyone engaged with changing patterns of scholarly communication; however, the report is primarily written for librarians and the last section examines actions for the university library

ARL commissioned Ithaka to undertake the field study for this report, which incorporates interviews with scholars who had reported using a range of online information tools. Online resources, typically created for open access and containing born-digital content by and for a scholarly audience, are the focus of the study; popular resources such as *Wikipedia* are therefore excluded. The study identified a total of 206 resources in eight categories:

- E-only (OA) journals (born-digital and published informally)
- Reviews of recently published literature, primarily monographs
- Shared Preprints and working papers on repositories
- Encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and annotated content
- Datasets
- Blogs
- Discussion fora
- Professional and scholarly hubs

The field study approach means that the findings of the report reflect the views of the 'converted' - scholars who do make regular use of these tools. The study is qualitative, and is certainly informative within this framework, but cannot be considered representative of academic practice at large. It does not indicate the proportion of scholars who actually make regular and detailed use of such resources,

but it does provide a valuable examination of how over 200 resources are being used, where they add value and how they are being sustained.

The study reveals some generic advantages perceived by scholars as common to all eight categories of resource. These are: access to the most current research, opportunities for exchange of scholarly communication, and helpful collocation of material. Speed of publication, greater space for expression (book reviews being a good example) and interactive exchange of ideas are all valued and seen as contributing to a faster pace of scholarship. Innovations supported in the online environment, such as video articles and public peer review are also being tried by the publishers of these resources. It is clear, however, that the strength of established publishing conventions in the academy often slows innovation. Related to this is the finding that the most used resources tend to be those of longest standing, such as *arXiv*, *Social Science Research Network* and *Protein Data Bank*, which have established credibility in their fields over a period of time. Some older technologies continue to hold their own too, notably listservs.

Although the study notes a range of experimentation, it points to credibility as the key factor in sustaining any resource, and notes the prevalence of some level of peer review throughout. Newer resources may take considerable time to establish themselves, but - if successful - can expect to attract regular engagement from scholars. The report adduces evidence of frequent use, including active contribution as well as reading, by academics at all stages of their careers. It also takes account of variations in practice among different disciplines, with the imperative for access to the latest research driving researchers in the sciences towards the use of data banks, while the exchange of ideas influences humanities scholars towards discussion fora. Another trend noted is the long tail of digital scholarly publications aimed at small and specialist audiences. This raises concerns regarding ongoing sustainability and long-term preservation, with a high dependence on individual volunteers and institutional support. Preservation is identified as an area where academic librarians can play a key role, as well as contributing by keeping abreast of new publications, facilitating access, promoting discovery and engaging with scholars in the further development of existing or new resources.

Overall, this report provides a timely snapshot of how the new digital scholarly communication tools it surveys are being used and are impacting on the way scholars work. Uptake is likely to be uneven, and innovation may be relatively slow, in the face of scholarly conservatism but quality resources with high credibility will earn their place alongside established publications. The report itself notes a valuable frame of reference for tracking developments in this area in the form of an ongoing study, by the Center

for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley, of faculty behaviours in the evolving scholarly communication environment¹.

¹ Harley, D. et al. *Interim Report: Assessing the Future Landscape of Scholarly Communication*. Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley. Center for Studies in Higher Education, 2008.

<http://cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/docs/SC%20Draft%20Interim%20Report%20060808.doc.pdf>

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