Publishing Scholars and Scholars Publishing in the Digital World

For the last decade, Rowland Lorimer has been an active researcher focusing on the Canadian publishing industry and the mass media. Lorimer has carried out more than 20 commissioned studies on book, magazine, and scholarly journal publishing. His research has resulted in numerous articles on the nature and dynamics of the publishing industry, government policy, learning materials, and scholarly journal publishing in Canada.

His current work is oriented to facilitating the transition of journal, book, and magazine publishers into online publishing, in part through the SYNERGIES project (http://www.synergiescanada.org/).

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Since the Second World War there has been developing discomfort between scholars and scholarly journal publishers, especially scientific, technical and medical (STM) journal publishers. Many, but not all such publishers, are commercial publishers. Other relevant publishers include large professional societies. This discomfort can be traced to the ambitions of Robert Maxwell to create a publishing empire in his own lifetime. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Maxwell gained control over the export of Springer Verlag’s German science journals. He marketed them and, almost from the beginning, overcharged research institutions for subscriptions. He used his profits to set up his own Pergamon Press journals and continued to overcharge, over-produce, and generally extract copious quantities of money out of research, scholarship and education. Other commercial STM journal publishers and some large professional societies, followed suit, in so far and they, too, collected substantially greater revenues beyond expenditures. That Maxwell was copied more than he was reviled indicates that Maxwell was merely a leader in establishing a dynamic that was bound to happen.

STM journal publishers have been pushing the limits of tolerance in the halls of academe and in houses of parliament around the world (given that most funding for research comes from government). Arguably, as well as extracting unreasonable levels of funding from research and education, the desire of STM journal publishers to maximize revenue has contributed to the diminution of library budgets for acquiring humanities and social science journals and monographs. In turn, this has foreclosed on publishing opportunities in those areas and thus unnecessarily distorted the development of knowledge. Dubbed a “serials pricing crisis” in the 1980s by librarians – because journal prices consistently rose faster than the consumer price...
index from at least the middle 1980s forward – for almost a decade scientists eschewed involvement with the management of the publishing of their research. In doing so, they appeared to believe that premium pricing paid by their own institutions for circulating the scientific knowledge they produced conferred upon them a justifiably exalted status. However, when the pricing policies of STM journal publishers combined with an increased volume of research to produce counter-productive bottlenecks in information flows, some scientists began to take action.

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As many know, one lead player was physicist Paul Ginsparg, who, in 1991, set up a server (http://arXiv.org/) at Los Alamos to allow physicists, and then other scientists, to post their research in “pre-print” form. (In the early 1990s, e-versions of articles were most often drafts submitted to journals for blind peer review, and e-journals were yet to be considered legitimate venues for publication. Peer review was conflated with print publication to mean formal official publication, hence the term “pre-print.”) Ginsparg’s server allowed any internet user to access research findings and hence to keep up to date with the latest, prior-to-official-publication, research. Another leader, psychologist Stevan Harnad, called on scholars to self-archive, to post their research on the net using suitable identification standards to allow it to be found and its content searched. Harnad was also a champion of Open Access, a cause embraced in 2001 by the Budapest Open Access Initiative (www.soros.org/openaccess/read.shtml) funded by George Soros’s Open Society Institute.

The initiatives of scholars such as Ginsparg and Harnad, and a good many others, received substantial attention in academe, especially in the context of the undimining concerns of librarians about STM serials overpricing. In the context of the development of the internet, publishing in ways alternative to high-priced commercial journals managed to breathe life into the creation of a research practice aimed at ensuring cost-minimized circulation of research in a timely fashion using efficient and effective technologies. This practice, at the apex of its manifestation, is termed Open Access and it seeks to ensure cost-free access to all research based, in part, on the rationale that there should be public access to publicly funded research. Open Access is complemented by other initiatives such as Lawrence Lessig’s Creative Commons where creators can signify to users the level of restriction they wish to place on their intellectual property. To some degree, the principle of public access has also led to enthusiasm for institutional repositories that have the advantages of working around access limitations imposed by publishers and highlighting institutional research activity, but the disadvantage of bringing into too-close proximity scholarly output and institutional interests in marketing, promoting and branding that could eventually impinge upon academic freedom and the professoriate being treated as employees with respect to copyright.

The response of the publishing community to the desire of scholars to redesign journal publishing to serve the primary goal of knowledge dissemination has been varied, even within the covers of Logos. For instance, Sally Morris (18:3) argues that the publishing community has no need to worry about losing its market essentially because there is ample room both for Open Access (i.e., freely accessible) and subscription-based journals. Joe Esposito (19:2) begins his article in measured tones, but as the article progresses it casts Open Access initiatives increasingly as problematic. By the end of the article, Open Access is portrayed as lacking both peer review (partly due to ease of marketplace entry) and publisher value-adds and leading to a flood of unfilted research results and hence the undermining of research communication. Were Open Access to be leading inexorably in that direction with no inherent correctives, there would be cause to worry. However, in principle, Open Ac-