We’re All in This Together: Responses to the Crisis in Scholarly Communication

These remarks were delivered as part of the “New Voices” Panel at the 2012 Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) Annual Conference. I would like to thank both ArLiSNAP and the ARLIS/NA Professional Development Committee for giving me the opportunity to participate in “New Voices,” which features work by students and new professionals.

Introduction: Defining the Crisis and the Response

When I saw the call for proposals for this panel, I noted that one of the preferred topics was the changing nature of libraries. And that’s exactly what I’ll be addressing today—the ways in which libraries are changing in response to the crisis in scholarly communication.

So what do we mean by the “crisis in scholarly communication”? Considering it in the broadest sense, the crisis includes:

1. Declining state and institutional support.
2. Too many graduate students (in virtually all fields), and not enough jobs.
3. The “adjunctification” of the academy, and the move toward limited-term appointments.
   a. e.g. increasing number of postdocs, fellowships, visiting appointments, etc.
4. Challenges to traditional modes of tenure & promotion.
   a. Especially in the humanities, the gold standard has been the monograph, but it’s becoming harder for scholars to get scholarly monographs published.
   b. And younger scholars are starting to question that gold standard, asking why other kinds of work can’t be used to demonstrate one’s fitness for tenure.
5. Lack of consensus on issues of digital rights management, delivery platforms, usability, library lending, etc. for e-books.
   a. Digital content isn’t the future, it’s already the present. But if you’ve ever tried to explain to a patron how to get a library e-book on their Kindle, or been faced with the awful user interface of most browser-based e-books, you know the e-book landscape has quite a bit of maturing to do.
6. Legislation and litigation (such as the now-defunct Research Works Act and the Author’s Guild suit against HathiTrust) which have the potential to make scholarly work less accessible rather than more accessible.
7. Difficult financial straights for academic and university presses, as well as scholarly societies and even trade publishers.
   a. Realistically, a scholarly monograph has a very small market—perhaps a few hundred copies sold if it’s wildly successful.
   b. For heavily illustrated books in our own fields of art, art history, and architecture, it can be difficult to sell enough copies of the book to offset its production cost, which is why many of our faculty (and their publishers) are on the lookout for large subventions to make publishing these books possible.
8. And finally “bad behavior” on the part of certain large, commercial publishers.
   a. The “boycott Elsevier” movement provides some humorous examples:
      i. http://lolsevier.tumblr.com/
      ii. https://twitter.com/#!/FakeElsevier/statuses/174584713757982720
      iii. https://twitter.com/#!/ClosedAccessJ/statuses/168854092964311040
      iv. https://twitter.com/#!/DutchOverlord/statuses/178497739504971777
   b. But Elsevier certainly isn’t the only publisher behaving badly, and they might not even be the worst.
Given this broad definition of the crisis in scholarly communication, we can also describe a number of responses to these events:

1. A robust and growing Open Access movement.
   a. We even have “predatory” Open Access publishers, mirroring developments in the rest of the scholarly communication landscape.¹

2. The development of an “alt-ac” community to facilitate the entry of PhDs into “alternative academic careers” outside the scope of the traditional tenure-track teaching job: http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/alt-ac/.

3. Alternatives and supplements to traditional professional societies and conferences:
   a. Un-conferences and the importance of Twitter for professional development.
   b. THATCamp: http://thatcamp.org/.

4. Innovative responses from academic publishers and other bodies who are seeking to meet the challenges of today's economically difficult publishing environment head-on

5. Library-based publishing, or library publishing services:

Library Publishing Services

Library publishing services or library-based publishing generally includes activities like journal hosting, digitization, data management, curation of digital collections, and education about issues of copyright, author’s rights, publishing contracts, and licensing. Library publishing services typically don’t include the robust copyediting, design, marketing, distribution, or sales services of a traditional publisher.²

Library publishing services represent an expansion of the library’s role in the ecosystem of scholarly communication. Needs change, as do library services. As our users have come to need guidance about their rights as authors, librarians and libraries have responded by creating tools like institutional author addenda. And as faculty on the editorial boards of journals found themselves in need of a new publisher, many libraries began offering journal hosting services or peer review management.

publishing.umich.edu

The University of Michigan serves as an interesting example of how libraries are offering new services in response to the needs of our campus community. In 2009, the University of Michigan Press, a full-service, traditional academic publisher, was brought into the University Library. The Library had its own suite of publishing services, so these units were reorganized and re-branded as MPublishing. As a unit, MPublishing brings together publishers, librarians, and technologists, and serves as the center of expertise for publishing and scholarly communication at the University of Michigan.

We provide education and instruction for publishing and copyright, including one-on-one consultations, course-integrated instruction, stand-alone workshops, and digital learning objects. A number of our clients are referred to us by a librarian in their subject area, and we also team-teach with our colleagues. For example, earlier this week we participated in an instruction session for graduate students in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, which introduced graduate students to academic publishing, and addressed topics such as how to select an appropriate journal for their submission, how to respond to reviewers’ feedback, and how to retain important rights to their own work after publication. For graduate students and faculty members working on a book, our Author-Publisher Liaison can


provide guidance on revising a dissertation for publication, preparing a prospectus, approaching acquisitions editors, and understanding your book contract.

In addition to education and instruction, MPublishing also offers low-cost journal hosting services, built by the same team that brought you HathiTrust. Our journal services ensure that our publishing partners’ content is discoverable, usable, and preservable for the long term.

We offer a range of print-on-demand options, including small, low-cost print runs using the University of Michigan’s Espresso Book Machine for local distribution, or larger print runs with sales and distribution via Amazon’s CreateSpace or Ingram’s Lightning Source. We also sell historical reprints from the University of Michigan’s collections.

**Bringing Publishing Services to Your Library**

Much of the work we do at MPublishing is a collaborative effort, and we rely on subject specialists to help us understand the needs of the campus and market our services to them. While we have technology and resources at our disposal, we still need the expertise and credibility of liaisons to reach students and faculty. For this reason, you can start creating publishing services for your own library, even if you don’t have a university press in your administrative unit, even if you don’t have an Espresso Book Machine, and even if you don’t have a designated scholarly communication librarian. As a subject specialist, you are already immersed in the world of academic publishing and scholarly communication. You already have much of the knowledge and skills necessary to help your students and faculty be more informed authors and content creators.

The first step is to educate yourself. Learn as much as you can about copyright, author’s rights, the state of the publishing industry, open access, and more. Fill in the gaps in what you already know. Focus on what you think will be most useful to your students and faculty.

Second, investigate the publishing activity happening on your own campus. Ask about student journals, departmental publications like histories or *festschriften*, and even alumni magazines. Find out if those publications need the help of a friendly librarian. Chances are, they do. Perhaps the student creative writing journal on your campus has questions about putting their back issues online. With your newfound expertise, maybe you can help them figure out who owns the rights to that old content, and how the journal’s current editors could make it available. In your work with the department, you might encounter an art history PhD student who has questions about making her dissertation available via Creative Commons. You can help her understand how to share her work without running afoul of rights holders, and without jeopardizing her chances of transforming that dissertation into a book somewhere down the road.

Finally, make publishing an explicit part of the conversation you have with your students and faculty. If you do an orientation session for new graduate students, why not a session for students nearing candidacy who might be interested in publishing one of the chapters of their dissertation as an article? Many of the same information literacy skills we teach students at the beginning of the research process are just as important when looking at what to do with the final product of that research. If you know how to help them find a journal that is relevant to their topic, then you also know how to help them find potential publication venues.

**Conclusion**

As librarians, we already focus on our attention on making sure that information resources meet the needs of our students and faculty. We ask database vendors to provide the features and subject coverage we need. We design our approval plans to send us only the books we want. Then why not work to create the publishing environment we need, too? Library publishing services is one way to achieve that goal. Scholars need to make their work available to the broader academic community. For all of the reasons we discussed, this task is becoming increasingly difficult. The crisis in scholarly communication is also an opportunity—an
opportunity for libraries and librarians to play an active role in creating the future we want to see for academic publishing. If we don’t like what Elsevier (or any other publisher) does with scholarship, then we need to help our students and faculty find other options for disseminating their work. We must continue to take on new roles and areas of expertise in the scholarly ecosystem. By becoming advocates, educators, and even perhaps publishers ourselves, I believe libraries and librarians can re-assert their position at the center of the scholarly enterprise, and ensure that the scholarly communication tools of the future continue to serve the interests of our faculty and students.