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What Collaboration Means to Me: Working Together to Build a Strong and Sustainable Digital Research Infrastructure

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When I was asked to write an article about collaboration, the first thing that came into my head was something that a very wise and experienced colleague told me early on in my scholarly publishing career. I was concerned about an initiative I was organizing that would bring together staff from a number of competing publishers, and his (reassuring—and, I now know, correct) view was that the most successful organizations and individuals in our industry collaborate first and compete second. What’s more, as he said, this is one of the things that make scholarly communications so enjoyable. Since the focus of this article is collaboration—a topic which is also of more interest to me than competition—that is what I will primarily be exploring.

Of course, there is a long history of collaboration (and competition!) among researchers themselves. It is an essential element of most projects, even though individuals (and their organizations) may be competing for the same funding dollars. And this doesn’t just mean working with colleagues in their own laboratory or institution—today more than ever research collaboration is likely to be at the national or international level. Markers of this increased collaboration include the rise in the number of multi- (and, in some disciplines, hyper-) authored papers¹, and the growth in cross-disciplinary research projects, which (as in the case of the European Union’s Horizon 2020 funding for cross-cutting issues²) are supported, and often encouraged, by funders.

In addition to the direct role played by funders, a significant part of what has made this sort of

global collaboration between researchers and their organizations possible is the development of a digital research infrastructure—products and services that support researchers and their organizations. These span everything from electronic lab notebooks and collaboration systems, through grant application and manuscript submission systems, to research profile and reputation management systems and beyond. Built primarily by the scholarly community, who also continue to invest in it—across all sectors, and including both commercial companies and nonprofits—the research infrastructure is a great example of collaboration between organizations that might otherwise be in competition with each other (such as publishers going after the best authors) or at odds with each other (e.g., a mission-driven nonprofit versus a large commercial company).

Why are they willing to cooperate when it comes to building a strong and sustainable research infrastructure? I believe this is where the notion of collaborating to compete comes into play. Supporting the research community is central to everything we do in scholarly communications, and a strong infrastructure enables the development of innovative new products and services that benefit researchers – by everyone! – by leveling the playing field. As a librarian at a small state college put it to me: “I may be driving a Honda Civic, while my colleague at Harvard is in a Porsche, but we both need a decent road to drive on!” Kristen Ratan of the Collaborative Knowledge Foundation, used a similar analogy at the Allen Press 2016 Emerging Trends in Scholarly Publishing meeting, but



with FedEx and UPS as examples of competing companies that both rely on access to the same strong infrastructure.³

So how does this collaboration actually happen? Persistent identifiers (PIDs) are a core component of the research infrastructure and in the PID world, Crossref, DataCite, and my own organization, ORCID, are all great examples of nonprofits that were conceived of, founded, and continue to be supported through collaboration between members of our community. In turn, their support for our respective missions and for the widespread adoption of PIDs is helping make the digital research infrastructure ever more robust and trustworthy – to the benefit of researchers and the organizations that serve them alike.

The group of organizations that collaborated to found ORCID was especially diverse. It included representatives from research funders, scholarly associations, publishers, repositories, universities and other research institutions, and from a mix of commercial companies and nonprofits. This seemingly disparate group of organizations agreed to collaborate, and continue to do so, because they were united in their belief that there was a critical need for a globally recognized persistent identifier for researchers that was both fully interoperable and non-proprietary. Our launch partners donated staff time for several years before ORCID went live in October 2012. Several also provided start-up funding in the form of low-interest loans. Thomson Reuters donated their ResearcherID code, which formed the basis of the original ORCID code; and Crossref's Director of Strategic Initiatives, Geoffrey Bilder, was seconded to ORCID for several months to help get us up and running.

Our Board continues to be made up of representatives from all sectors of the research community, but broader community collaboration is also critical to ORCID's success. Embedding ORCID IDs into the hundreds – maybe thousands –

of systems that researchers interact with globally requires buy-in not just from the organizations responsible for those systems, but also from the individuals who use them. Much of our time, therefore, is spent engaging with our community to better understand and meet their needs. This includes helping our members build the best possible ORCID integrations for their users; encouraging ideas for future ORCID development, for example, via our iDeas Forum; providing regular updates on current and planned future developments in our blog, member newsletters, and elsewhere; and running frequent outreach and training events, such as our regional workshops for research managers, librarians, and researchers. In 2015 we also carried out our first community survey, to help us understand people's perceptions (and misperceptions!) of ORCID, how they currently use their ID and how they'd like to do so in future, what they like and don't like, and more. We also asked respondents to select three words/phrases that best describe ORCID for them from a list of 22. Collaborative wasn't one of them (unfortunately for the purposes of this article!), but approachable (which was ranked #3), easy to work with (#5), and community-driven (#6), which could arguably be used collectively as synonyms, were.

If collaborating with our community is critical, collaborating with colleagues internally is every bit as important. As a completely virtual organization, however, this can sometimes be a challenge. There is no ORCID office – we all work from home – and the entire team only meets up in person once a year, though the directors have quarterly face to face meetings and most of us also have occasional opportunities to meet with our colleagues during the rest of the year. We use an array of tools to help facilitate communications and collaboration – several types of online meeting services, collaborative software such as Slack and Trello, and so on. Even more important, though, is our team's individual and



collective commitment to collaborating with each other and with our community. ORCID would not survive without this level of collaboration—it's in our DNA!

Of course there are many, many more wonderful examples of organizations and individuals collaborating in scholarly communications. As my colleague said all those years ago, it's what

makes our industry such an enjoyable one to work in. And whatever our motivations—competitive or otherwise—in my book continuing to collaborate is critical to the future of research and, therefore, a cause for celebration!

¹ Plume, A., & van Weijen, D. (2014, September). Publish or perish? The rise of the fractional author. *Research Trends*. Retrieved November 16, 2016, from <https://www.research-trends.com/issue-38-september-2014/publish-or-perish-the-rise-of-the-fractional-author/>

² European Commission. (2016, July). Horizon 2020: Work programme 2016-2017. *European Commission*. Retrieved November 16, 2016, from

http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2016_2017/main/h2020-wp1617-focus_en.pdf

³ Allen Press. (2016, May 3). Symbiosis—Is Collaboration the New Innovation? (Part 2 of 3), Kristen Ratan [video file]. *2016 Emerging Trends in Scholarly Publishing™ Seminar*. Retrieved November 16, 2016, from https://youtu.be/mhkOxeUGEIU?list=PLYbpVL27qHff3BVHuNXqYsqTs2e98_MpT