Science is fundamentally a peer-to-peer process and online communities will shape the evolution of scholarly publishing

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The transformation of publishing models and platforms remains a recurrent issue for the scholarly community to grapple with given new technologies. **Graham Steel** *provides an overview of a recent conference on the role and evolution of scholarly publishing offering an expansive look at how digital technology will continue to support the advancement of science for the widest possible audience.*

Publishing: Evolution, Disruption & the Future was a one day Conference at the Edinburgh University Business School earlier this month. The event looked at how the publishing industry is changing and how it will continue to evolve given new platforms and digital tools. This post looks at the first session titled Open Information, Innovation & Communication: Making Publicly Funded Information Free, which featured talks from Cameron Neylon (PLOS), Tom Pollard (Ubiquity Press), Matt McKay (STM) and Mark Lester (Open University) to discuss the key trends shaping scholarly publishing and open information.

This session explored how open data, open access and digital communications can help to make cutting edge research more efficient and engaging for the widest possible audience. Warts and all, the full 2:26 hours worth of the recording of Session One is below. Spin forward (link) to skip out the intro. section if you wish to go direct to the first talk by Cameron Neylon.

Publicly funded research in the sciences, medicine, the arts and the humanities is often hidden behind paywalls and access is limited to those organisations who can afford to pay substantial subscription fees. Over the last decade, this model has been changing and innovations are now being widely supported by Governments (e.g. here, here and here), Institutions, funding agencies, researchers and the public.

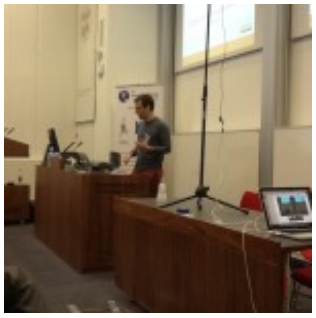
Jack Andraka, the 16 year old scientist and cancer researcher, and Dr Francis Collins, the Director of the US's National Institutes of Health (NIH) illustrate the importance of publishing models in this short film on how open access can empower new breakthroughs for the advancement of human health. Cameron mentioned this video to me the night before the event as it has just been released. We felt it was of great relevance to the event and can be found here.

Cameron Neylon, Advocacy Director for the Public Library of Science (PLOS) presented "Publish or Perish? The profound shift in scholarly publishing and how the future looks". Cameron started off with two noteworthy quotes from social and technological innovation expert Clay Shirky:

1. "Publishing is no longer an industry. It is a button"
2. "It's not information overload. It's filter failure"

He went on to deliver a powerful talk about openness, PLOS, STM publishing in general, the emergence of 'disruption' in the industry in 2000, where we are now, and some predictions about the future. Cameron mentioned how the distribution costs of publishing reduced dramatically with the advent of the web and how the web itself grew out of academic institutions. In terms of distribution, due to the web, distribution and printing costs have "gone out of the way", so the ability to grasp a much wider readership is extremely significant. There are no space limitations in this medium. He concluded his talk by

returning to where he started. Science is fundamentally a Peer-to-Peer process and always has been. It was never a broadcast system. He said that science is the place to look for what is happening now and what comes next in publishing. Online communities will be able to provide appropriate filters for the ever expanding information, as he alluded to earlier when quoting Shirky. This video of Shirky's talk from 2008 was highly recommended by Cameron.



Cameron's talk was followed by Tom Pollard, Co-Founder of Ubiquity Press with his talk titled, "Are you being served?" (video here). Tom's was the shortest of the four talks in this session. He spoke largely about Ubiquity Press (as I hoped he would) and mentioned how they differ in terms of scope from other well known OA Publishers such as PLOS/BioMed Central etc.. What is perhaps unique about Ubiquity Press is that the staff not only have clear knowledge in publishing (bringing experience from BMC, PLOS and Springer), but they remain tightly coupled with the academic community (several members of the team actively involved in university research). By making use of open technology, such as Open Journal Systems, Ubiquity Press keep publication costs down and make open access affordable. As a result, Ubiquity Press is increasingly being approached by established journals looking to leave their current publishers for an open access, progressive alternative. I totally agree with Cameron's point during Q&A that Tom underplayed Ubiquity Press. They are still very young and are part of the emerging breed of new credible OA publishers such as, eLife and PeerJ to name a couple. The Q&A part of Tom's talk was most excellent. It starts here.

Next we heard from Matt McKay, Director of Communication & Events at the International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers (STM). Matt based his talk "To infinity and beyond" largely upon this poster very recently produced by the Future Lab Committee, a project of the STM Association. As per the title of his talk, it was mainly about "the future" of scholarly publishing. Matt focused on how technologies are evolving and how publishers also need to evolve to suit people's needs. He therefore spoke about the ability to read articles on mobile devices and the different publishing formats beyond the PDF. Interestingly, he felt there was still life in the PDF format and that it itself was evolving.

The final speaker for Session One was Mark Lester, Head of Strategy Development at the Open University whose talk was entitled "MOOCs and Textbooks: Future Competitors or Complementors?" Mark gave an interesting insight into the success and future of MOOCs in higher education. Mark wished to point out that he would not be talking about publishing but instead on whether MOOCs and textbooks were competitors or complementary to publishing.

2007/2008 saw the advent of MOOC's. He said that at the moment, the number of MOOCs are expanding at a rapid pace and that they are fundamentally changing how Higher Education is being delivered, and that they are dramatically reducing delivery costs as touched upon earlier in the session. He went on to discuss how MOOCs have the potential to impact more interactive textbooks. He spoke about how MOOCs can be a resource alongside courses. In a slide at this point (on credit bearing MOOCs), he mentioned that 43% of schools plan to offer MOOCs within the next 3 years, 83% would consider joining a education group such as edX, Coursera or Udacity and 44% are planning for MOOCs in the future

He ended his talk by stating that the pace at which MOOCs are moving is "quite electrifying". "MOOCs are opening up new markets for publishers", he argued, with the caveat that publishers have gone digital as well and are challenging MOOCs. There is a "gradual" challenge ahead in this field. Either way, the future is digital he argued and mention was made of Future Learn.

Session One concluded with an interesting 15 minute Panel Discussion. The main items that came up here were the prestige of Journals/brands (both new and old), publishing negative results, Impact Factor, business models and how innovation in science publishing may help other publishing platforms.

The organizing team (I am pleased to be one quarter of it) are already planning future events, register your interest here if interested. Details about the event covered in this post are here, speakers here and programme here. The event was streamed live on Google+ and also live tweeted, please also see this Storify relating to the Conference.

Sections of this post were originally posted here on the figshare blog where Graham writes regularly about Open Science.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the Author

Graham Steel *has been involved in Patient Advocacy since 2001 and is a strong advocate and vocal supporter of Open Access, Open Data and Free Culture (interview). Graham was recently referred to as an "Open Science Machine" in this Prezi.*

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