What do universities want from publishing?

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Abstract

At a simple level, universities want publishing to support and further their mission to carry out research and teaching. However at a detailed level there are major differences within and between universities which mean there will be different wants and expectations of publishing. Bearing in mind these complexities, this paper examines universities' various requirements as producers, purchasers and consumers of publications. Some of the key wants of universities include impact, affordability, quality and access. The merits of the established system of subscription-based journal publishing and the emerging system of open-access publishing and dissemination are discussed in relation to universities' wants.

Introduction

The question, 'what do universities want from publishing?' is asked from time to time by publishers, subscription agents and content aggregators. It is an important question. Since academic publishing exists in large part to support the work of the higher education community, it is essential that key players in the publishing industry should review this question regularly in order to ensure their customers' requirements are being addressed. This is particularly true in the rapidly changing publication environment that exists today. In such an environment, it is also important that universities themselves frequently review this question in order to make sure that the publishing system is operating in their interests. This article attempts to identify at least some major elements of what universities (and other higher education institutions) want from publishing and suggests some points that should be considered in responding to their 'wants'.[1]

At one level, the question has a relatively straightforward answer. Universities have a mission to carry out research, deliver teaching and facilitate learning. They want publishing to support and further that mission. This is true for all universities, whatever the balance between research and teaching in their institution. This article concentrates on the research side of publishing, although some points discussed will also apply to teaching. Since research publishing in science, technology and medicine is already (and in other subjects, is increasingly) dominated by journal publishing, this article will focus on that area.

At one level the answer may be simple but when we begin to look at the detail of *how* universities want publishing to support their research and teaching activity, things become rather more complicated. One way of exploring the issues is to think about some

of the ambiguities that underlie the question itself. This will enable us to think more about 'universities' as institutions, their 'wants', and their views of 'publishing'.

Universities

The question, 'what do universities want from publishing?' implies that universities have a unified set of 'wants' in relation to publishing. This is often not the case for a number of reasons. Firstly, universities are complex organisations. They often have devolved structures, where power (including budgetary responsibility) is distributed throughout the organisation. Medical Schools often behave as universities within universities. The same might be said of Business Schools or Law Schools. The distribution of power in universities is often emphasised by elaborate committee structures. Committees have the role of generating, approving or implementing institutional policies leading to variations in the way things are done. Whilst universities are perhaps less democratic places than they used to be, they still have representative bodies such as the Senate and Council where people from different parts of the institution can have a say in institutional policy.

Universities have become more businesslike in the way they conduct their affairs in the last couple of decades and this has resulted in greater strategic direction from the university centre. However, there is still often a gap between corporate strategy driven by the centre and the local reality in schools and departments. Generally speaking, academics just want to get on with their research and teaching, and are suspicious of any interference (as they often see it) from the centre. It is common for academics to refer to 'the University' (meaning the central administration of the institution) as though it is a different organisation from the one in which they work!

Just as there are differences between the university centre and the academic schools, there are also significant differences *between* schools. Different subjects have different ways of working (and that includes different publication practices). Very often academics have more in common with colleagues in different institutions from the same subject community, than colleagues in the same institution from different subject communities. Even *within* schools significant differences exist. Schools usually have a culture of encouraging individuals to pursue their own research and teaching interests (sometimes independently, sometimes within small teams). In classical organisational theory, universities have a 'person culture'.[2] Individuals are loosely bound together by virtue of membership of the same institution but are allowed (indeed, encouraged) to pursue their individual interests.

As well as significant differences within institutions, there are also differences *between* them. In the UK, there are different types of universities, ranging from the research-led 'Russell Group' institutions, to the teaching-led 'New Universities'. These institutional differences will result in different requirements (at the detailed level) from publishing. Other countries have similar sorts of institution types and therefore correspondingly different publishing requirements.

'Wants'

Differences within and between universities often mean then that it is difficult to pin down exactly what they want from publishing but the term 'want' itself also needs further explanation. This is not just a question of semantics, it can make a practical difference in terms of service provision. 'Want' can on the one hand mean 'to desire' or 'to wish for' something. On the other hand, it can mean 'need' or 'ought to have'. As every service provider knows, there is often a significant difference between what people ask for and what they actually need.

Customers ask for things they know about. Since they have direct experience of existing products and services, people will often say what they want is improvements to these products or services (improvements in terms of quantity and quality). However, they will often be less conscious of the more fundamental needs that these products and services aim to address. These 'fundamental wants' will therefore be articulated less often by customers. This means that they are also unlikely to ask for new products which answer their fundamental wants in very different ways. People may sometimes only be conscious of their need for a product when it becomes available to them (or at least when information about it becomes available via marketing). The personal stereo is a classic example of a product that consumers did not know they wanted until it came on the market. However, once consumers had bought and made use of it, they wanted improvements. The basic model was then quickly improved in line with what customers were asking for. Improvements were also enabled by advancements in technology. Ultimately, these allowed step changes from cassette to CD to mp3 players.

Providing what customers want involves then a complex set of activities. It involves listening to what customers are asking for but also trying to interpret customers' requests to work out the fundamental needs that lie beneath them. An assessment then has to be made of what is possible (technically, financially, organisationally, and so on). It needs to be recognised that sometimes customers' interests can best be served by delivering a product or service that they themselves are not yet aware that they need. As well as listening to customers, providers may also sometimes have to inform or educate customers so they are better aware of what is available or possible. Marketing can often be about leading customers in particular directions by informing them of what they might or should be asking for.[3]

Publishing

The question 'what do universities want from publishing?' is also rather more complicated than might at first be thought since 'publishing' is itself an unclear category. Increasingly, publishing is being seen as a spectrum of possibilities ranging from formal publication in a peer-reviewed journal to informal dissemination of information, with a whole range of options in between. There are often significant differences between subject disciplines on what is acceptable in the scholarly communication process. Various disciplines have developed different cultures of communication that mean they will have somewhat different requirements in relation to publishing. Readers of *Learned Publishing* will of course be familiar with this point and so it need not be discussed in

detail. But it remains very important. Different understandings of 'publishing' will co-exist in different subject communities within the same institution.

There are then three main issues which create complications when addressing the question 'what do universities want from publishing?' Firstly, there are major differences within and between universities which mean there will be different detailed wants in relation to publishing. Secondly, there are different kinds of wants some of which may reflect different levels of understanding of what is possible or desirable in publishing. Thirdly, there are significantly different views of what publishing actually is and what it is for.

Universities and publishing

One way of cutting through these complexities in order to address the question of what is wanted from publishing is to think about the different roles played in universities in relation to publishing: producers, purchasers and consumers. The different wants of people in universities will be shaped by the role they are carrying out. Sometimes these different roles are carried out by different groups of people. It is librarians who normally purchase publications, whereas it is the academic staff and students who are the consumers. This fact has undoubtedly been important in determining the way in which the publishing market has developed in recent years. On the other hand, in some cases more than one role may be carried out by the same people. The producers are also often consumers of publications, although their needs in these two roles differ. Institutional managers may not carry out any of these roles themselves, but they support the various groups in their different roles for the benefit of the institution. Publishers also interact with stakeholders in universities in their various roles. However, it is interesting that often publishers describe their primary role as serving *authors* (not authors *and* readers but authors). From the perspective of a research institution, it might be suggested that an approach which concentrates on primarily serving researchers in their capacity as authors may well skew the publishing process.

Occasionally, universities may become publishers themselves. A few institutions (such as Oxford and Cambridge in the UK) have a tradition of large-scale publishing. Most other universities publish grey literature, such as reports or occasional papers, on behalf of their members. Some may also publish a small number of monographs per year or a few periodical titles. For the most part, however, such publishing activities remain small-scale and will not be considered in detail here.

Universities as producers

As producers, universities are working within a particular context which affects the way in which they carry out the role. Three points are important here. The first is the 'publish or perish' imperative. This driver is of course well known in academic and publishing circles. But publishing *per se* is not enough for researchers. It is also important that their publications have impact. The second imperative is therefore 'get cited or get out!' Authors and their institutions want their publications to be read, built on, and cited by

other researchers. High-impact research output usually enhances the standing of the researcher and improves the chances of further research grants. Research funding is the third key point. In the UK, thinking on this is dominated by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The RAE assesses the quality of research output and is the basis of determining levels of government research funding. However, it is important to recognise that the RAE does not just measure but also *determines* publishing behaviour in universities. Institutions and their authors behave in ways that they believe will maximise their RAE scores. Other funding streams which are linked directly or indirectly to published output encourage similar behaviour.

Within this context, in their role as producers, researchers and their institutions wish to achieve the rapid and wide dissemination of content. They want their publications to be highly visible and expect publishers to carry out appropriate marketing and metadata distribution activities to achieve this. High visibility maximises the impact potential of publications. Impact for authors essentially means citations, but for institutions impact is a wider issue. Institutions also want to make an impact (in a more general sense) in their local community, in the media, and in industry. Their research publications may sometimes help them to do this. Institutions are increasingly coming to see their members' publications as assets in their own right, the impact of which in the research community and beyond can be enhanced with greater institutional support and management.

Commercial and IPR (intellectual property rights) issues may also be important. There may of course be commercial value associated with some publications. The publication of monographs and textbooks normally create income for authors from royalties. However, this is not usually the case with journal articles which are given free of charge to publishers. Nevertheless, there may be commercial potential in the research itself (through patents, spin-off commercial initiatives and so on). In this case, the university will want to ensure that the publication of research results will not jeopardise the income generation potential of the work and will want to manage the IPR carefully. However, even where there are no immediate commercial opportunities created by the research, universities will have certain expectations in relation to IPR. They would certainly expect their members to be able to retain such rights that enable them to re-use articles for teaching and to be able to re-publish them elsewhere. Increasingly, universities and some individual researchers also want to be able to self-archive their papers on open-access web sites, preferably both the pre-referred and post-refereed versions. The retention of copyright itself is less important than the retention of these sorts of specific rights. Universities and their members need clarity on their rights. Unfortunately, many publishers' copyright agreements currently lack clarity, particularly in relation to self-archiving.

Quality is important to universities and their authors in the role of producers. They want their publications to receive peer recognition and some kind of quality endorsement. This is crucial for the RAE, but also as the basis on which institutions and subject communities operate their reward mechanisms. Promotions in institutions and conferrals of positions of responsibility in subject communities (such as in learned societies) often

come after strong publication records have been built up by the researcher. This means that researchers do not want to take risks with their publications. They normally want to publish in high-impact, high-prestige peer-reviewed journals where their work will be recognised. Many authors also appreciate the high-quality service that is often associated with such publications, including rapid and accurate production of proofs, prompt replies to queries and high-quality formatting and graphical work. Understandably, authors like to see their work is being handled sympathetically and intelligently.

Universities as purchasers

In their role as purchasers, many of a university's requirements inevitably centre on price. Universities want publications to be affordable. For this reason they would often prefer pricing deals to be negotiated through purchasing consortia. Flexibility in pricing is also important. Universities want pricing arrangements which allow them to select (and de-select) material in line with the research and teaching activity in the institution. They also want transparency. Pricing models for e-journal deals are often enormously complex. Most institutions want greater simplicity and ideally some standardisation in pricing models. Deals should also include some basic elements as standard. For example, perpetual access to content once it is paid for should be the norm (content should be preserved and kept accessible). Licences should allow for off-campus and multiple-campus usage by members of the institution and also provide for 'walk-in' usage by legitimate external members of the library.

This leads on to issues of usage. In this area, 'integratability' is important. Universities want to be able to fit content from various publishers into a coherent service offering for their institutional users. This means that they do not want multiple 'one-stop shops' from different publishers. Rather they want publishers to make content accessible using relevant international interoperability standards (such as Z39.50 and OpenURLs) that will enable users to move between publications from different publishers in as seamless a way as possible. At the same time institutions want to be able to easily get reliable and comparable usage data for their members. This will enable them to fine-tune the way in which they select, promote and present resources. The COUNTER initiative is one that universities very much support.[4]

Universities as consumers

The first priority for universities as consumers is quality. They want access to high quality output which they know has been through appropriate quality checks (usually including peer review). Crucially, they also want clear quality *markers*, usually provided in the established journal literature by recognisable titles which act as brands. These brands carry with them assurance of pre-publication quality control procedures which are well understood by subject communities. In addition to pre-publication quality screening, post-publication quality measures are becoming increasingly important. Services such as usage and particularly citation analysis are helpful in identifying key parts of the literature around which further research activity is cohering and act as a complement to pre-publication quality control. Universities and subject communities make increasing

use of this kind of information for such varied purposes as promotion committees or purchasing decisions.

The other major priority for universities as consumers is access. In an ideal world, researchers would want easy access to the range of literature in their field (both current and historical), to the desktop, on and off campus, without any intrusive authentication challenges or other barriers. In the current reality, of course, compromises have to be made. However, researchers still care about access. They also want to be able to navigate the literature; for example, moving between bibliographic records and full-text, and from one text to another as seamlessly as possible. They want value-added features such as reference links and also links to data and related materials.

Publishing systems

With such a broad range of wants in universities, it needs to be recognised that there are often tensions between them. For example, quality control procedures (particularly peer review) can often take time. This is in tension with the requirement for rapid dissemination. Quality control can also be expensive and this may be in tension with the requirement for affordability. Any successful publishing system has to achieve an acceptable balance between the different wants.

The subscription-based journal publishing system has up until now been successful in addressing the requirements of universities and their researchers. The system is particularly strong in such areas as quality, branding, and document preparation (copy editing and formatting). However, the environment within which this system of publishing is operating is changing rapidly. In particular, the World Wide Web has created potential which is not being fully realised within the existing paradigm, designed as it was in a paper-based world. The current system is increasingly being seen as weak in areas such as impact, affordability and access. As producers, universities and their researchers are aware that the impact potential of their research is being limited because of restrictions placed on circulation by subscription-based publishers. As purchasers, universities are finding that they cannot afford to buy nearly enough of the published literature. As consumers, university researchers do not have easy access to the required range of publications to support their research and teaching.

The subscription-based publishing paradigm is now being questioned by an increasing number of stakeholders in universities who believe it does not give them what they want. An alternative paradigm, open access, is beginning to emerge as a serious possibility. The two 'roads' to open access, open-access journal publishing and self-archiving on open-access repositories, are now being seen by some as possible ways of better addressing the wants of stakeholders in universities. Open access does appear to create significant possibilities: maximising the impact potential of research papers (making them available to the widest possible audience), achieving greater affordability for institutions (creating a competitive market in which only the essentials of publishing are paid for), and lowering access barriers for the research community (in which potentially all of the literature is freely available). There is also enormous potential for achieving greater

navigability between different pieces of content (using technologies such as the Open Archives Initiatives Protocol) and also establishing meaningful post-publication quality indicators at the article level (through barrier-free automated citation analysis).[5]

There is no reason why quality control should suffer in an open-access system if open access is implemented with the quality imperative in mind. The high quality of papers in open-access journals, such as *PLoS Biology*,[6] and open access repositories, such as arXiv,[7] demonstrates this. However, whilst it may not be weak on quality itself, open access *is* currently weak on branding and other quality markers. New open-access journals take time to achieve brand recognition and even longer to achieve consumer brand loyalty. Open-access repositories need to develop completely new ways of flagging content quality which the research community will understand and trust. This last weakness (of quality markers, rather than of quality itself) needs to be addressed before open access can take off.

Do universities want open access?

But do universities want open access? It is sometimes observed that researchers and their institutions on the whole are not asking for open access. Do they want it? Publishers should deliver what universities want, but, it is sometimes said, universities do not want open access. Is this true?

It depends what is meant by 'want'. The issues discussed earlier are crucial here. Many of the 'fundamental wants' of universities in relation to publishing have already been outlined – including, impact, affordability, quality and access. But if you ask an academic, 'do you want open access?', they are most likely to reply, 'what do you mean?' If you ask 'do you want access to more journals?', the answer will certainly be, 'yes'. If you ask, 'do you want free and unrestricted access to the literature in your field?' (open access in other words), the answer will be, 'yes'. The answers you get depend on the questions you ask.

At present, many stakeholders in universities are unaware of the possibilities in relation to open access. This should not surprise us. Most researchers are experts in their own field, not in the economics of publishing. They want to get on with their research, not spend time agitating for changes in scholarly communication processes. This is especially true when they have pressures on them, such as RAE, which encourage them to work uncritically within the *status quo*. For this reason, the stated wants of most academics tend to concentrate on improving the existing system not replacing it with an alternative. But this is changing, albeit slowly. Stakeholders in universities are becoming better informed about the possibilities. Informed wants may often (though not always) see the potential of open access. This means it is likely that open access will be explicitly asked for more frequently as time goes on. However, if publishers are only (or primarily) listening to researchers in their capacity as authors at the time they want to be published or as editors committed to the *status quo*, then they will hear this message late.

But, do universities *need* open access (the other kind of 'want')? The fundamental wants of the various stakeholders in universities are about impact, affordability, quality and access. Some stakeholders are beginning to recognise the potential of open access and ask for it. It is up to the leaders of the academic, library, publishing and funding communities to work towards translating these (stated or unstated) requirements into a publishing system that will work in the best interests of authors, readers and their institutions. The key players have a responsibility to take a strategic view and provide leadership in their communities. Sometimes this may involve designing and delivering a service that the majority of customers are not yet asking for. As part of the process, the merits of open access as a way of delivering the basic wants of universities need to be taken seriously and further tested. Authors and readers also need more information about its potential impact on them and their work.

Conclusion

Universities want publishing to support and further their research and teaching activities. They are interested in a complex range of issues (including impact, affordability, quality, and access) from a variety of perspectives. In a rapidly changing publishing environment, publishers need to work innovatively with new technologies and new business models in order to make sure they are delivering what their customers want. The various stakeholders in universities will normally be happy to work with publishers in achieving this, and it is important that publishers work with them all – authors, readers, librarians, and institutional managers alike.

Acknowledgements

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[1] This article is written from a personal point of view and is based on professional experience, extensive discussions with academics and university managers, and analysis of the literature. Much of the empirical evidence available is in the area of assessing the views of *authors*, for example Swan, Alma, P. and Brown, Sheridan, N., *JISC/OSI Journal Authors Survey: Report*, Truro: Key Perspectives Ltd., 2004. Available at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/ACF655.pdf; Rowlands, Ian, Nicholas, Dave and Huntingdon, Paul, *Scholarly Communication in the Digital Environment: What Do Authors Want? Findings of an international survey of author opinion: project report*, London: ciber, 2004. Available at http://ciber.soi.city.ac.uk/ciber-pa-report.pdf.
[2] See Handy, Charles, *Understanding Organizations*, 4th ed. Harmandsworth: Penguin, 1993, 189-191.

[3] See the classic marketing paper, Hamel, Gary and Prahalad, C.K., Corporate imagination and expeditionary marketing. *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 1991, 81-92.

[4] http://www.projectcounter.org/.

[5] For an overview of arguments in favour of open access, see the Budapest Open Access Initiative statement, http://www.soros.org/openaccess/.

[6] http://www.plosbiology.org.

[7] http://www.arxiv.org.