



Commentary — A New Day In How Scholars Communicate

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Since the founding of the Royal Society (of London for Improving Natural Knowledge) in 1660—an event that some mark as the beginning of science as it is known in the modern world—the production and consumption of scientific writings have been subject to economic necessities that have forcefully shaped the very nature of knowledge. (The earliest members of the Royal Society paid an "admission fee" of 10 shillings at each Wednesday afternoon meeting, which went to subsidize the publication of *Philosophical Transactions*, the world's first scientific journal which dates from 1664.) The costs of printing and transporting paper have exerted a tremendous influence over which scientific writings are made public and who constitutes the public for whom they are published. When a hundred years ago the cultural and intellectual strains of positivism/operationism were conveniently joined with the professionalization of science in the university and the economics of industrialized capitalism, modern scholarly communications assumed its present form. A reader in the year 2000 browsing a scientific journal from the year 1910 will find the environs thoroughly familiar. About ten years ago, the economics of publishing and communicating writings over vast distances were radically changed by the emergence of the internet, i.e., telecommunications utilizing small, cheap computers. The effects of this revolution in telecommunications have yet to change the way scholars publish and who reads their writings. Three and a half centuries of custom and entrenched economic interests will not yield readily to a new day.

The work of scholars can now be shared almost instantly with literally ten-fold or a hundred-fold more persons than could access such works in the past. And yet, there are those who would squelch this revolution if they could. The economic interests of publishers of scholarly journals are obvious. Less obvious is the fact that their profits—variously estimated as high as 30% to 40%—are the envy of the business world, and that scholarly publishers are now working frantically to find ways of owning the communications among scholars, arguing that the "value added" by their editing and formatting justifies

their continued intermediary role between scholars and their audience. Many non-profit scholarly societies owe a good portion of their income to paper publications and are indistinguishable from commercial publishers in regard to their wish to maintain things as they are. The editors of *Current Issues in Education*, as well as editors of other electronic journals, will attest to the fact that professional quality editing and formatting can be achieved by individuals working in public institutions and making their efforts freely available to the world for the public good. Recently, the majority of the faculty at Cal Tech signed a petition vowing that they would no longer cede copyright of their work to commercial journal publishers.

More difficult to understand, perhaps, are the motives and attitudes toward electronic telecommunications of scientists and scholars themselves, particularly those who occupy influential positions in universities and scholarly societies. William J. Brand (1999), in his dissertation research on electronic scholarly journals, interviewed nearly three dozen prominent researchers in physics, mathematics, psychology and education on the subject of their practices and attitudes toward electronic publication. Surprisingly, the "softer" the discipline (education and psychology being considered much "softer" than physics and mathematics), the more insistent the researchers were that all publication be rigorously refereed and the less concerned they were with timely release of work. Educational researchers worried that any compromising of the highest academic standards would permit errors to enter the body of knowledge about education. Some even expressed the somewhat supercilious opinion that it is desirable for manuscripts to lie around for months or even a year to give the authors time to mull over their work. (Those who expressed these opinions were professors long ago tenured, it bears noting.) Physicists, on the other hand, said, "Give me the article as soon as it's written; I can make up my own mind if it is right or not." And so they do, as any visit to <http://xxx.lanl.gov/>, where physicists and many other scientists archive their "preprints," will quickly show. (The British have already

established a "preprint" archiving service for educational researchers called *Education-line*.)

Now the issue of "peer review" in the production of scholarly writings and the issue of access to those writings by the public are easily separated. And I hesitate to continue down the road that leads to a severe critique of peer review, particularly since I do not wish to infect my colleagues who edit *Current Issues in Education* with the virus of "low standards," the virulent kiss of death in the academic world. So permit me to say just a few words about access. The great joy of this new world of electronic publication comes at least once a day to those who edit scholarly ejournals. The same computers that "serve" out the publications also record the location (nation, for sure, sometimes the university or organization) of the recipient

(the personal identity of the recipient is generally ambiguous, though not always). By scanning the daily access logs, one can see the locations of persons who visited the journal that day and downloaded articles. *Current Issues in Education* is still a bit young to have established clear patterns of usage. On a good day, CIE will be visited by about 100 persons, but a look at a more established ejournal, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, will show the breadth of access to scholarly writings that beggars by comparison the distribution of paper journals. The access logs for EPAA for one weekday in August 1999 (a notoriously slow month for academic work in the Northern Hemisphere) revealed the following features among the nearly 1,000 persons who visited the journal that day:

Location	Number of Persons
aol.com	156
Canada	42
Australia	42
United States School Districts	29
United Kingdom	16
Netherlands	16
Malaysia	15
Saudi Arabia	12
Singapore	11
Mexico	8
Japan	6
New Zealand (Aotearoa)	6
Philippines	4
Turkey	4
Taiwan	4
Thailand	4
Columbia	3
Hungary	3
Hong Kong	3
Indonesia	3

France	2
Nepal	2
Portugal	2
Cyprus	2
Mauritius	2
Brazil	2
Chile	2
Italy	1
Brunei	1
Belarus	1

Numbers like these are not simply gratifying, they are also very informative. The more than 150 persons visiting the journal from America Online represent mostly persons not connected to the traditional academic community; many teachers and administrators maintain AOL accounts, as well as school board members and interested citizens. It is difficult to imagine this number of such individuals making their way to the stacks of the nearest university library to find a research article on education policy.

The connections from the Philippines, Turkey, Thailand, Columbia, Hungary, Indonesia, Nepal, Mauritius, Brazil and Chile represent accesses to scholarly literature that has often been beyond the reach of these individuals, because commercial publishers charge libraries as much as \$200 U.S. for journals of fewer than 300 pages. The remaining nearly 600 persons accessing the journal on that day were from universities in

the U.S. The journal, EPAA, competes for attention with three other journals in its field whose combined subscriptions total about 5,000. One article in EPAA has been downloaded 25,000 times in three years. A national survey of home schooling was published in the journal on March 23, 1999, and surpassed 9,500 downloads on August 1, 1999.

The new age of scholarly communications immediately promises wide access at low cost. On a day now not even dimly foreseen, it promises to reshape what scholars mean by "publication" as well as the very nature of their work. That day cannot come too soon.

References

- Brand, W.J. (1999). Papyrophiles, philistines and electroncentrics: The slow growth of electronic scholarly journals. Doctoral dissertation. Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University.

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Author Notes

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Note from the 2011 Executive Editor, Lori Ellingford

October 2, 2011. This article was first published at the original *Current Issues in Education* website, located at <http://cie.asu.edu/articles/index.html>. In 2009, *CIE* changed online platforms to deliver the journal at <http://cie.asu.edu>. The original *CIE* website is now only used as an archival repository for published articles prior to Volume 12. Efforts to make the current *CIE* website inclusive of past publications have necessitated the repurposing of this article into the published format you are viewing now.

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