

## Conference report

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# The First Nordic Conference on Scholarly Communication

22–23 October 2002, Lund, Sweden, and 24 October 2002, Copenhagen, Denmark

The First Nordic Conference on Scholarly Communication was the first one to bring librarians together from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden in one place. It was arranged by the Danish Research Library Association, DEF (Denmark's Electronic Research Library), Lund University Libraries and Novo Nordisk Library. The role of Novo Nordisk was notable for the reminder that researchers outside the academy are as dependent on scholarly communication as scholars within the university.

The organizers put together one of the most stimulating and informative programmes this reporter has seen. It brought together a number of initiatives that challenge the current publishing system. It raised a number of matters that became running themes through the discussions. Inevitably, it raised more questions than it answered, but it crystallized a number of issues that must be solved if the prevailing system of publishing is to be replaced by something that is to be seen as better.

The initiatives covered were many:

- **Natalia Grygierczyk** described *FIGARO* (federative European academic e-publishing initiative), of which she is Project Manager. It is an EU-sponsored project that creates a network of academic publishers, software companies and university libraries from The Netherlands, Germany and Poland. During the next two years, *FIGARO* is intended to establish a platform and economic framework for non-profit scholarly publishing.
- **Jan Velterop**, *BioMed Central's* Publisher, described how it is turning the conventional model of journal publishing on its head by recovering the cost of publishing from authors, at \$500 per article, and by inviting libraries to become members at an annual subscription starting at \$1500 but depending on size. Authors from member institutions would have their article fees waived. The resulting journals would be freely available online to readers. This removes the need for expensive subscription and access control mechanisms within the publishing house, and means that access to research articles is open; readers have access without barriers.
- **Michael Grossberg**, Editor of *American Historical Review*, pointed out how online publishing may help solve the crisis in monograph publishing – the natural medium of scholarship in the humanities. It allows humanities scholars to follow the trend in the social sciences to replace monographs by journal articles, and to use projects like Gutenberg-e to demonstrate online packages of monographs. He emphasized the important role of journals like *American Historical Review* in reviewing

new forms of publication to validate them. He indicated that the demand for such initiatives come from readers rather than from professional historians; new forms of publishing do not depend on sophisticated technology, but on updating the language of peer review and on developing the ability to interpret the new media.

- **Manfredi La Manna**, Reader in Economics at St. Andrews University, was adamant that academics can publish journals themselves. He illustrated how commercial publishers had been able to exploit the natural monopoly each journal enjoys, and described his determination to return scholarly publishing to the academy. His charitable foundation ELSSS is creating a model for online journal publishing that can be exported to other disciplines. He illustrated this by describing a new online journal, *Review of Economic Theory*, that is designed specifically to target Elsevier's *Journal of Economic Theory*. The *Review* will be available on subscription to libraries in OECD countries, but free to those in transition and developing economies. What is more, he intends to pay referees for their work on peer review.
- **Bo-Christer Björk** of the Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration is leading another EU-sponsored project, *SciX*, Scientific Information Exchange. *SciX* models the publishing process in order to compare the total system costs of the subscription-based model of publishing with one based on open access. His preliminary conclusion is that open access systems are clearly less expensive.
- **Eric van de Velde**, Director of Library Information Technology at Caltech, described some OAI initiatives at Caltech libraries to create repositories for technical reports, theses and Caltech-authored books. These repositories are openly accessible for non-commercial use, and are clearly driven by the institutional needs of Caltech.

Other speakers concentrated on issues of culture and academic policy.

- **Jean-Claude Guédon** of the University of Montreal spoke of the role of the journal in allowing an academic to qualify as a scholar. Publishers fund journals and find themselves participating in the academic promotion system, although their primary motive is to earn a return on their investment. He wants the academy to regain control of the process and restore the 'Republic of Science', by developing activities around open access archives.
- **Peter Boyce**, Senior Consultant to the American Astronomical Society, emphasized that the journal is not enough. He drew on the American Astronomical Society's pioneering work in developing online services that include an e-print server, indexing services, digital multimedia and datasets. Nevertheless, astronomers still submit articles to journals as authors, and still prefer the journal for their reading – even for current awareness. He drew a parallel between the AAS's policy of charging authors \$1200 per article to publish, and a price to be paid by subscribers, with BioMed Central's approach of author charges and institutional membership fees, and concluded that the differences are less significant than might at first appear.
- **Ken Frazier**, Director of Libraries at the University of Wisconsin, has been vocal in his dislike of the 'Big Deal' in which a library or consortium pays a small premium over its current aggregate subscription expenditure with a publisher in order to gain online access to its whole list of journals. He warned that such purchasing makes libraries hostages to the Big Deal, but he acknowledged that it enjoys strong support from faculty. He was emphatic in welcoming the experiments described at the conference, and drew attention to others that had not featured in the programme.

- **Declan Butler**, the European Correspondent of *Nature*, pointed out that the driving force for change must come from within the academic community. If the system does not suit authors or readers, the community will begin to take matters into their own hands. He pointed out that online publishing created an opportunity to create solutions appropriate to different disciplines, and that the future would be heterogeneous.
- There was an interesting and informative contribution from **Peter Kurtzhals** and **Ole Dragsbæk Madsen** of Novo Nordisk on the role of scientific literature in the corporate sector. A strong publishing record supports grant applications – which themselves are peer-reviewed – which is fed by reports and data submitted for publication in the journals. This ‘closed loop’ depends on the system of peer review; academic quality control is as important to commercial research as it is to academic scholarship.

Five clear themes emerged from this conference:

- Scholarly communication comprises much more than just the journals themselves, even though much of the discussion centred on STM journals. Nevertheless, the journal is a ‘brand’ that is valued by authors in deciding where to submit their papers, and by readers who readily utilize citation data and Impact Factors as a measure of a journal’s quality.
- Open access to the journal literature was a consistent theme in discussion. But this idea needs to be developed. For some, open access does not include commercial use. But one of the benefits of open access is that literature is free to be read by all, so that the cost of subscription and access management can be removed from the publishing process. If readers outside the seclusion of the academy are to be excluded, access is not open, and the benefits to universities and to the society of which they are a part will be denied.
- The driving force for change has to come from authors as well as readers. Authors are conservative. The system of publication will only change if authors and readers want it to. Although the Public Library of Science has attracted nearly 30,000 signatures, it has had little discernible effect on submission behaviour. Authors choose a journal for submission not only on the basis of its Impact Factor but also on their perception of its quality and reputation among their peers.
- In the first presentation at the conference, **Ingegerd Rabow** of Lund University Libraries made some telling points about user expertise in searching for information; the quality of the question dictates the quality and relevance of the results. **Ken Frazier** made a similar point about students ‘choking’ on the volume and variety of information. Both points highlight the need for user education and for a role for librarians in training and information navigation.
- The need for marketing new initiatives ran through the conference. Even if material is available free of charge, it is of no use to the reader unless he or she knows it exists. Most of the experiments emanating from the academy concentrate on process, with little reference to marketing. Moreover, some of the projects and the institutional repositories that universities have established have side-stepped the established mechanisms that give order and structure to the published literature. There is no catalogue of open access journals. They do not have ISSNs, and are not systematically listed in the institution’s OPAC or Ulrich or indexed in the relevant abstracting and indexing services. They do not use the DOI (Digital Object Identifier) or CrossRef, the system of links from citations to full text. However worthwhile they may be, if they are not integrated into the existing scholarly literature environment, they will not be found.

This conference was thought-provoking. It is a shame that so few publishers were present. It would have shown how discontented both academic librarians and many of their academic users have become with the present journal publishing system.

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*The presentations /abstracts from the conference are available on:*

*<http://www.lub.lu.se/ncsc2002/>*

*The 2nd Nordic Conference on Scholarly Communication is planned to take place in spring 2004.*