

The future is waiting for us – The role of the permanent record in an enriched & dynamic publishing ecosystem

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Abstract. This paper is based on a panel session on various aspects of the Version of Record (VOR) – the permanent record, held at the APE 2022 Conference. It argues that even with the current possibility of sharing versions and elements of the VOR, such as a preprint, an Author Accepted Manuscript or protocols, the VOR still remains valuable. The scholarly community should continue to protect the VOR and recognise it as an enabler of invention. This way, research can be communicated in more rapid, more open and more diverse ways, enabling readers to access a fuller picture of research.

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1. Introduction

This session came about after consultation with a range of stakeholders, many of whom went on to contribute to this session and the panel discussion chaired by Anne Kitson. It seemed to me that there is often a common assumption threaded throughout conversations about expanding the published output of research or making more elements open – they rely on the existence of the published version of record. Is the VOR providing a vital anchor point for content such as preprints, data, or green repositories to make sense? If so, then is it valued and recognised as such, or should we (or are we) moving to a world where different outputs and versions can exist independently with recognised value without the need for a Version of Record as a reference point?

This was a session of two halves discussing various aspects of the Version of Record. We started by discussing the risks to the VOR and then continued the next day with a talk from Lisa Hinchliffe discussing the value of the VOR followed by a panel discussion moderated by Anne Kitson.

2. Context

For a few hundred years there has been general agreement that the creation of a permanent record of research outcomes, time-stamped and verified by peers, is a good thing. As we know, the permanent record, or the Version of Record (VOR), is recognised as the peer reviewed final conclusions of the study,

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typeset into article format, checked in many ways, and published in an academic journal or platform. And whether commercial or not-for-profit, all publishers then work in the same way to put a highly organised framework around this body of published knowledge.

Whether commercial or not-for-profit, we all make sure that removal or addition of content from the published record is very carefully managed and documented – people are often surprised we don't just remove a piece of content because someone requests it. We have believed for a few centuries now that this shared endeavour to create a trusted corpus of knowledge is useful now and into the future.

However, as we all know, this need for coherent preservation has naturally led to a very conservative content model – an article today bears very close resemblance to those published 50, 100 or even 200 years ago.

In the last few years there has been appetite to reinvent, to open the research process, to publish and share more of the findings and the process behind it – and this is a very good thing.

Irrespective of access model, there are opportunities now to share versions and elements of the VOR – a preprint, an Author Accepted Manuscript, or protocols. Early findings and discussions of results used to be communicated in conferences or through personal communications, but that's no longer necessarily the case. There is scope for more comprehensive output from research, giving sight to content that wasn't traditionally considered for publication – null or partial results, protocols or data, or assets associated with evaluation such as reviewer reports. Also, dynamic elements such as multimedia content or commentary. All providing different but useful value.

In this session we put forward the argument that this welcomed innovation is **predicated on the fact that the VOR, the permanent record, remains a valuable thing and something that we should continue to protect**. This means its existence needs to be acknowledged as valuable, and it needs to be recognisable by machines and by humans as a distinct item that is time & quality stamped, and that we all need to continue to play our part in it continuing to exist. The permanent record cannot and should not be an inhibitor of change, but an enabler of invention so that research can be communicated in more rapid, more open and more diverse ways.

3. Conclusion

During lively discussions and many interesting points being raised, one phrase stuck in my mind – **Should the scholarly communication goal be to move from Version of Record to Record of Versions?** Currently we see deep infrastructure and standards around the VOR – there is common understanding of what it is, who it is for, what it looks like, who owns the copyright, where you find it and what has happened to it to turn it into a peer-reviewed article published in a journal or on a platform. The publication venue itself gives an indication of what it is, for instance the scope or selectivity of a journal or platform and this value is recognised. Is there now a need to put that same structure around other outputs to help signal what they are and what has happened to them? Perhaps the need for this is overdue, currently non-peer-reviewed content and peer-reviewed published articles can look identical with few indicators bar the place you find them helping a reader to understand what they represent. Once there is a clear record of versions – each version having distinct value with those reading it having clearer understanding of what it is and machine and humans knowing where it fits in the ecosystem, the opportunities presented for enabling readers to access a fuller picture of research is an exciting proposition.

4. The version of record under attack! The dark side of the scholarly publishing universe

This session took the form of lightning talks, each speaker having 10–15 min to present their position or point with the intention of the topics raised being discussed in the subsequent panel discussion. Panelists were: Christian Behl¹, Prof. Bernhard Sabel², Dr. Alicia Wise³, Tim Kersjes⁴, and Hylke Koers⁵. Summaries of the presentations can be found in this APE Special Issue.

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