Scholarly communication covers a broad range of activities, including the discovery, collection, organization, evaluation, interpretation, and dissemination of information, and the publication and dissemination of scholarly research.


When you think of innovation, scholarly communication might not come to mind but the turn to the digital is potentially as “disruptive” here as it has been elsewhere.

Why does it matter? Scholarly communication is central to every scholar’s career. The outputs of scholarly activities are the images blocks of reputation. They are key in decisions about tenure and promotion and in the allocation of research grants, academic awards and honours. They are significant not only for individuals but for institutions. The collective scholarly record informs the metrics and rankings that differentiate universities in the competition for resources. So, much depends on scholarly communication.

Scholarly communication is often defined narrowly to mean publication and dissemination of scholarly research primarily through books, monographs and journal articles. The Mellon Foundation’s 2008 definition [above] expands this to include a range of activities from discovery to dissemination and leaves space for the changes emerging as the digital is increasingly embedded in all aspects of everyday life.

What does this mean for scholarly communication? The answer, in large measure, could, or more strongly, should, depend on scholars. The technical and material conditions offer up a set of possibilities but the particular practices that emerge, the different ways of understanding the opportunities and challenges are social. However, scholars are not alone — publishers, researchers, librarians, university administrators, archivists, and IT specialists and others each play a role in the scholarly communication system. The range of intellectual and financial interests suggests the potential for unanticipated consequences is high.

What’s happened so far? Scholars generally have now adapted their practices to engage with digital technologies, especially when this has improved their work practice in some way. Access to the journal literature online and increasingly to books online has generally been well received. The cost of this access did not affect scholars directly, at least not initially. However, as subscriptions to journals began to be cut in the 1980s — largely in the scientific, technical and medical fields where the cost is high, and others realized that libraries collectively face regular expenditures of millions of dollars for the licensing fees to support this access, many began to wonder if there might be another way.

Open Access (OA) — literature that is accessible online free of charge and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions — is one response. OA is not prescriptive in terms of “where” a scholar publishes — she can continue to publish in the society, commercial or open access journals of her choice, and the majority of commercial journal publishers, at least in the sciences, now permit some form of open access. Open access urges scholars to self-archive, that is, to include their work in an online archive or repository accessible to all. Today there are 1,764 institutional and subject archives or repositories, including U of T’s T-Space, listed in the Registry of Open Access Repositories. The contents are discoverable through Google and an argument for self-archiving is that it makes your work available to the global community.

By way of example, last week I received email from a faculty member interested in a paper I recently posted to T-Space. The paper, written for a specialized art and design conference, had been published in a volume with limited distribution. When the paper was initially accepted, I reserved sufficient rights to make the paper available in T-Space and there were several wins — the paper counts academically as it was peer-reviewed, I enjoyed the benefit of an intimate and specialized meeting, I have a small volume for my booksheif and I am assured of global access to my work.

Public funding and access are increasingly linked. Major funders, including the U.S. National Institutes of Health and Canadian Institutes of Health Research, have passed mandates requiring publications that result from publicly funded grants be deposited in an online, openly accessible archive. Harvard, University College London and others have passed mandates or policies in support of OA practices and articles on OA appear regularly in publications such as The Chronicle of Higher Education. OA was a theme at the recent 2010 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Who pays? Technology often makes explicit what was formerly implicit. The Internet, the World Wide Web and the 1993 launch of Mosaic, the browser that made the web openly accessible to millions of non-technical people around the globe, have made it possible to do things in new ways and encourage inquiry into traditional practices. Research on the economics of publishing by commercial, society and OA publishers, university presses and scholars has exploded. This engagement, or what at times looks more like a battleground, is generating new ideas.

In the university sector consider the University of California’s eScholarship Online, which “provides a suite of open access, scholarly publishing services and research tools that enable departments, research units, publishing programs, and individual scholars associated with the University of California to have direct control over the creation and dissemination of the full range of their scholarship.”

To this point my focus has been largely on text-based content, or on doing old things in new ways. What about doing new things? Not to mention asking new questions, developing new methodologies and creating and working with multimedia content. Here too experiments are underway across the intellectual landscape. A technology infrastructure referred to as cyberinfrastructure that combines mass storage, high-performance computing and other core technologies is leading to new workflows and new opportunities for scientists but also for humanists and social scientists. Rome Reborn, an international collaborative project is one example. Hybrid forms that bridge the physical and virtual worlds also exist. Ubinmark books, part of Sorin Matei’s research at Purdue, incorporate QR codes in physical books. The codes can be “translated” by a smart phone to open an embedded URL or other information. It’s easy to see how a scholarly paper or book in cinema studies, history or art might be enhanced if the reader had immediate access to the film clips and images being analysed and discussed.

Are we looking in only one direction? The continued struggle with the cost of text-based dissemination may turn out to be short-sighted indeed as new ways of creating and disseminating knowledge come increasingly to the fore. It’s unlikely these will be less expensive, and who will pay?

Do new practices and forms of knowledge creation “count”? Scholars interested in new practices, methodologies and media are unable to work in these ways if they “don’t count.” Individual disciplines and fields have accepted norms about what constitutes knowledge and how the legitimacy of a new knowledge claim is established. While faculty are appointed to a department, faculty or other academic unit that regulates and administers the reward system of tenure, merit and promotion, it is the scholarly communities within which individual faculty members belong, who through processes such as peer review, evaluate the claims on which local institutional decisions depend. Senior faculty may be able to afford the risk associated in engaging with new practices, yet is often their junior colleagues who are at the leading edge of these changes who can’t afford to move away from traditional, often print-based forms. How might new work be evaluated? And what’s lost if it doesn’t count?

There are more questions than answers and your input will help shape the future of scholarly communication. If you’ve stayed with me this far, I hope that you can engage you in my research. A survey to understand emerging trends, attitudes and practices regarding scholarly communication at the University of Toronto is forthcoming. If you receive an email to participate, I hope that you’ll do so.

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