

Annual Meeting of the Society for Scholarly Publishing

San Francisco, 5-8 June 2013

The 35th Annual Meeting of the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP), held from June 5 to 7, 2013, in San Francisco, was an interesting and rewarding experience. With the theme “Surviving (and Thriving!) in Our Multi-Access World: Navigating the New Publishing Paradigm,” it provided insights on a broad range of issues in scholarly publishing, from Open Access to Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). Remarkably, the meeting saw over 800 attendees, of diverse backgrounds: journal editors, librarians, publishers, etc. It also had quite an international flavor, with participants and speakers from Turkey, Japan, Egypt, Brazil, and India, in addition to the US. The exhibitors too were a diverse group: HighWire, Microsoft Research, Thomson Reuters, the British Library, etc.

The meeting began with a warm “welcome to the Hotel California” by outgoing SSP president Carol Anne Meyer, followed by the opening keynote address titled “Some Reasons for Optimism” from Tim O’Reilly (Founder and CEO, O’Reilly Media Inc.). He shed light on how technology, as well as data, is changing the face of publishing (from the old “filter then publish” to the new “publish then filter” paradigm). Using examples such as the Square and Square Reader applications, he showed how (1) technology needs to go beyond the level of a single device, (2) sensors can be used to transform the users’ experience, and (3) data make it possible to deliver new services. He recommended that managers invest in technologies that make things easier for the user. He ended by explaining how systems that overhaul the workflow will affect scholarly publishing.

Another interesting session was the plenary one on MOOCs, moderated by David Smith (CABI). Dan McFarland (Stanford University) shared his experiences in conducting MOOCs, discussing their impact on students, universities, and pedagogical practices. Mimi Calter (Stanford University Libraries) made an interesting point that MOOCs conducted by high-profile professors or universities can be inappropriately used by small or community colleges. Franny Lee (SIPX Inc.) discussed the MOOC content behaviors observed at her organization, dwelling on the opportunities and advantages of MOOCs, especially the data generated from them. Laura Leichum (Georgetown University Press) discussed the new opportunities MOOCs provide for publishers and issues regarding their sustainability. She also noted copyright concerns related to MOOCs, particularly the question of whether MOOC content belongs to the professor, platform provider (eg Coursera), or the institution. The panel also responded to audience questions on concerns such as the fact that professors who conduct MOOCs are not paid, the future of MOOCs in the face of their high dropout rate, and students’ perspectives on MOOCs.

Another plenary session was conducted on global policy and research trends. Some interesting graphics were presented by the moderator Toby Green (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) on research spending, international collaboration, entry rate into

university-level education, etc., across countries. This led to questions on government funding for research as well as a lively discussion on the impact of China’s economy on the academic arena in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Japan. Some telling points were made by the panelists: (1) Tarek El-Elaimy, American University in Cairo Press, Egypt; (2) Mikiko Tanifuji, National Institute for Materials Science, Japan; (3) Simon Bell, British Library, UK; and (4) Abel Packer, Scientific Electronic Library (SciELO), Brazil. An important insight I gained from the discussion was that submissions from China to Brazil-based journals are on the rise, and since many of these journals are Gold Open Access ones, this trend could have financial implications. Additionally, Mikiko Tanifuji discussed the experiences of her institution, which has many Chinese visiting researchers. This session also touched upon the impact of digital textbooks and study materials.

In between these sessions were around 25 concurrent ones on various aspects of scholarly publishing – the challenges and opportunities of open access publishing, the freemium access model, alternative impact metrics, new technologies to facilitate the peer review process, etc. Another highlight of the meeting was the Round Table discussion, in which participants freely discussed various topics over lunch, for example, digital libraries, remixing content, growing one’s global presence, and integrating ORCID. The meeting ended with some “servings” from the SSP blog Scholarly Kitchen, a session in which authors of Scholarly Kitchen posts shared their views on the most prominent topics discussed on the blog in the previous year, including how PubMed Central has led to a drop in traffic at journal websites.

I found a strong theme running through this well-organized meeting: the need to embrace various technology-driven changes in scholarly publishing as well as the benefits and excitement that can accompany the change process. Indeed, the new publishing paradigm was considered more of an opportunity than a threat to the scholarly publishing industry. I’m looking forward to the next meeting, to be held in May 2014 in Boston, Massachusetts.

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