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Eve, Martin Paul and Holmwood, John (2017) Creating the future of academic publishing. Emerald Group ,

Creating the future of academic publishing

In advance of Emerald's Academic Book Week event on January 23rd, two of our key speakers – John Holmwood and Martin Paul Eve – discuss some of the key questions around academic publishing and the research ecosystem.

John Holmwood is Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham.

He is a former President of the British Sociological Association (2012-2014) and member of the Expert Reference Group for the HEFCE Report on Open Access and the Monograph (January 2015). He is co-founder of the Campaign for the Public University and co-founder and joint managing editor of Discover Society (a free online magazine of social research, commentary and policy analysis).

Professor Martin Paul Eve is Chair of Literature, Technology and Publishing at Birkbeck, University of London.

He is the author of many journal articles and four books, including Open Access and the Humanities (available open access from Cambridge University Press). Martin is also a founder and CEO of the Open Library of Humanities.

Martin Eve

1. What do you consider to be the major hurdle for academic publishing to overcome in the next 5 years?

The challenge here is the same as it has been for almost two decades now: how to adapt business models for fair remuneration of publisher labour while also harnessing the dissemination power of the open web. Calls for open access have been ongoing since 2002 but, in many disciplines, it remains an under-realized dream. The challenge is that while subscriptions have worked well for more than half a century, the web fundamentally changes the possibilities for the spread of work. Publishers are going to have to take some risks and experiment with models (and I mean new models, not just Article Processing Charges) to make this work.

2. As an academic, how do you see the role of the publisher changing?

Well, it's probably worth saying up-front that I'm not a typical academic so my answer may not be reflective of a broader demographic here (I've written extensively about scholarly communication and am a publisher myself). But, my feeling is that I see the future role of the publisher as filtering, framing and amplifying academic work on the web (silently quoting Michael Bhaskar here, but I don't necessarily see the functions as working in that order). These act as services to authors and to readers that require labour and in which publishers can participate. I would also like to see less resistance from publishers in future on preprints (the practice of posting a working copy online) and more emphasis on digitally preserving academic outputs.

3. In your opinion, what factors should be considered when measuring the impact of a piece of research? Is this currently the case?

I'm going to answer this in a slightly roundabout way, I'm afraid, since "impact" means many things to many people. In the formal evaluative cultures of the UK's Research Excellence Framework it pertains to measurable behavioural

change while others take the term to be more about dissemination and general education. In the disciplines in which I work, though, it's often very hard to measure the types of benefit that one might get from having an educated and engaged general citizenship.

The aspect of measurement that I remain at once interested in, but also sceptical of, is "altmetrics". For "online attention" does not equal positive impact even while it may indicate something...

4. What advice would you give to young researchers and academics, embarking on their careers over the next few years?

Embrace open access publishing. I can't tell you how many good things have come out of it for me. From e-mails from non-academics thanking me for letting them read my work through to career benefits. Aware that I am writing this for a publisher, so apologies in advance (!), I do want to add: don't confuse the name of a journal or a publisher with the quality of the work inside; you can choose where to publish and I am opposed to publishers representing themselves as the gatekeepers of prestige when we, as academics, can choose where to publish and where to review. Finally, do not accept intimidating contracts and read them carefully. Copyright transfer agreements mean that your work will still belong to whomsoever you give it up to 70 years after your death.

Royalties on the majority (but not all) academic work are close to zero, so negotiate with publishers; most are very open to this but academics don't always realize it.

5. How do you think academic publishing should embrace interdisciplinary work practices?

The biggest challenge here, I think, is getting peer-review to work.

Books or articles on, say, religious history, tend to aggravate historians and theologians in equal measure and there's no pleasing everyone. So, working out how to balance any process here such that it is sensitive to the demands of different disciplines may help. I think also that new modes of review, such as post-publication review or open review, could be of benefit here, but such moves must be sensitive to disciplinary norms.

6. How do you think that innovative publishers can complement the researchers of the future in new ways?

As I've indicated above, I am interested in open access, preprints, modifications to the review process, and other aspects of digital practice. I think, also, though that we have a larger looming problem in the sense of the publication of arbitrary digital objects: data and software. Innovative publishers need to start thinking about this now because the challenges are enormous, particularly in terms of digital preservation.

John Holmwood

1. What do you consider to be the major hurdle for academic publishing to overcome in the next 5 years?

The rise of for-profit providers and the development of web-based course modules with integrated content (lecture, film clips, readings) supported by face-to-face adjunct-delivered tutorials. This is likely to give rise to decline in library purchases of academic print-based texts and replacement by content

that can be disaggregated from its 'carrier' (ie making available electronic chapters and part chapters).

2. As an academic, how do you see the role of the publisher changing?

Journal publishing continues to be under pressure for open access content. Possible pressure on monograph publication – though in the UK the Stern REF recommendations and the shift to two items per academic may lead to revival as universities pursue quality outputs. But publishers may need to provide library copies of books with online versions able to be "re-packaged" in part for online course material. The HEFCE consultation on Stern has also indicated that it wishes all publications, including monographs, to be available open access for the REF after 2021.

3. In your opinion, what factors should be considered when measuring the impact of a piece of research? Is this currently the case?

In the UK, there is insufficient appreciation of academic publications for wider publics. The REF pushes toward narrow academic audiences and the impact agenda drives academics toward "co-production" with specific users. The emphasis on impact favours instrumental benefits of knowledge, rather than its intrinsic satisfactions for author and readers.

4. What advice would you give to young researchers and academics, embarking on their careers over the next few years?

Those in the UK need to keep a clear eye on REF requirements and notice that the requirement of two publications of high quality per REF cycle will enable them to pursue a more differentiated approach to publishing and to the audiences for their research. Possible restrictions on portability of outputs may

mean that they need to develop mentoring relationships outside their own institution to keep their plans "under wraps" from their own institution.

5. How do you think academic publishing should embrace interdisciplinary work practices?

I am cautious what to recommend here. I think there are two kinds or interdisciplinary research. The first I call critical interdisciplinarity engaged with wider intellectual issues and challenging boundaries. The second is applied interdisciplinary studies and tends to operate within the comfort zone of existing disciplines and tied to instrumental interests deriving from the impact agenda. Academic publishing should be careful to maintain a clear distinction between the two and ensure a niche for the former

6. How do you think that innovative publishers can complement the researchers of the future in new ways?

The push toward OA monograph publishing is going to be a serious concern and will require innovative responses both in terms of business models and forms. It is clear that readers of academic books are quite resistant to online versions and so there needs to be pricing that allows free online and access to a print on demand version for a supplement. The latter, if priced properly, could be an additional source of revenue in sales to individuals rather than libraries.