



eNews

CONNECTING THE KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY

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Let's talk

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I was delighted to be invited to be part of UKSG's new Outreach and Engagement Subcommittee. I'm a relative newcomer to the world of scholarly communication, having only worked in the field since 2014. I previously worked for Mendeley, which became part of Elsevier, and I now work for Hindawi, an open access publisher.

Like many from outside the sector, I had no real understanding of the world of scholarly communications prior to becoming part of it. Since joining, I've invested quite a lot of time into learning as much as I can. I'm fortunate to have received plenty of help with this from colleagues, and from people I've met at various conferences and events along the way.

Despite all this help, I still struggle to talk clearly about the sector. I'm always jealous of people who can explain what they do for a job in fewer than ten words. Whenever I need to explain the concept of open access publishing, I generally begin with the invention of the printing press and ramble my way towards the present day. My conversational partner's eyes usually glaze over before I reach the 20th century.

There's no getting around it: we all work in a complicated space. It's even tricky to know how to refer to this huge collective ecosystem. I happily refer to the publishing 'industry' or 'business', but I know it would be an anathema to many people for me to talk about the 'scholarly communications industry'. 'Sector' is probably the best catch-all, but it still feels a little wishy-washy.

Of course, complexity-induced confusion doesn't just apply to publishers. Many librarians I've spoken to have told similar stories about being expected to recommend summer holiday reading, when their actual role means they haven't touched a book in years (professionally speaking). Researchers regularly disappoint people by not fitting the lab-coat-wearing, test-tube-wielding stereotype.

And we're not just worried about our individual complexity. Many of our day-to-day headaches stem from the intersection of our roles. Librarians, publishers and researchers are bound together in complicated support networks and byzantine business arrangements. We're intertwined. We spend a hell of a lot of time thinking about how we interact, and how those interactions can be made better – or, in some cases, dispensed with entirely.

We find ourselves in the eye of a storm of multifaceted complexity, shaped by a history that stretches back hundreds of years, and constantly buffeted by the winds of technological disruption.

A little bleak, perhaps? Luckily, our community contains some of the smartest and most passionate people in the world. For better or worse, we've seen unparalleled technological

progress over the last couple of decades. Communication is easier now than ever before in human history. There are a lot of very clever people working hard to make sense of it all. There are a lot of great people who want to help and talk things through. We just need a way to facilitate and support those initiatives.

UKSG is brilliantly placed to do just that. It's one of the only organisations to offer membership to such a diverse group, comprising librarians, publishers, and researchers, amongst others. It's this diversity of membership that really sets it apart from other associations, allowing for conversations that couldn't happen anywhere else.

Discussions around scholarly communication and academic publishing – particularly between members of the different 'tribes' – can sometimes feel adversarial. It can feel as if we're being forced to take sides in the various skirmishes of a simmering conflict, with publishers and vendors on one side facing off against researchers and librarians on the other.

Genuine frustrations exist, of course, and there are absolutely justifications for those frustrations. However, the mindsets that emerge as a result of these frustrations can sometimes trend towards dogmatism. As with most conflicts, there's a temptation to make generalisations about the other side; "All publishers are only interested in X", "Librarians don't understand Y", and so on.

Entrenched ideas lead to fatigue and negativity, making any interaction with the other party a chore. It's also additional baggage for any new starters. There's nothing that quite takes the wind out of your sails like finding out a large section of the community immediately views you with suspicion because of who you work for.

It's not just preconceptions about others that can hold you back. Entrenched ideas about your own organisation, and about the specifics of your role can also be stifling. The idea that only salespeople are allowed to talk to customers, or that only specific types of librarians are allowed to go to certain conferences, is a restriction that limits creative – and even pragmatic – thinking.

UKSG's diverse membership can help to break down these silos and allow for a freer exchange of ideas. Its events, such as the annual conference (held in Glasgow earlier this year), provide the perfect opportunity for different tribal representatives to come together to share news and ideas. There's an onus on us all to leave our suspicions at the door when we take part in events like this. It's a delicate balance, and it's never going to be a perfectly neutral environment, but the more we can find common ground – primarily through honest conversation – the better our mutual understanding is going to be.

UKSG is more than a conference, however. Its seminars, courses and workshops provide a year-round programme of relevant education. Its e-News service helps us to stay informed on current events. These benefits, along with its clear focus on a specific mission and a defined set of values, help UKSG to act as a constant, reassuring presence in a rapidly changing sector.

There are challenges that need to be addressed – and the creation of the Outreach and Engagement Subcommittee is an acknowledgement of these challenges. I personally hope that as a subcommittee we can make real progress on a few key areas, including:

- identifying and inviting participation from underrepresented sectors of the knowledge community
- creating more awareness among individuals within member organisations, informing them of their UKSG membership and communicating the benefits of membership
- encouraging input from individuals across a more diverse range of roles within member institutions and organisations
- demonstrating to members how they can leverage their membership by way of best practice suggestions

I'm also really excited that membership of this subcommittee will allow me to speak with a wider range of people from across the sector. I want to have conversations. I want to have areas for improvement pointed out to me. I want to help solve each other's problems.

If you have any comments or suggestions for the subcommittee to consider, please drop me a line (paul.tavner@hindawi.com) or connect with me on Twitter (@ptavner).



This UKSG Editorial is taken from the industry newsletter *UKSG eNews*, published every two weeks exclusively for UKSG members. The newsletter provides up-to-the-minute news of current issues and developments within the global knowledge community.

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