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Future-Proofing Your Journal: Today's Essentials, Tomorrow's Strategies

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Publishing Director of BMJ and BMJ Journals, opened BMJ Journals' first U.S. symposium with a summary of the issues facing society publishers in 2010 – falling library budgets and advertising revenues, emerging technologies and markets, tough competition for authors and reviewers, changing business models and communication mechanisms. But “these are not all problems,” Ashman reminded the group, “there are opportunities here as well as challenges.”



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Changing Landscape for Medical Societies

Consultant Morna Conway focused on the unique complexities of society stakeholders (journal owners, publishers, customers and content providers) whose various objectives create potential for conflict: financial imperatives, academic credentials, community service, intellectual currency, moral expectations and ideals.

Journal Owners

Journals are assets for societies (value is typically calculated as 3 x revenues). They contribute to the profile, prestige and brand of the society, and their content provides a conduit to the media and the wider public. It's therefore vital that partners and suppliers are selected for their ability to help protect and grow the value of the asset. As potential members start to limit the number of societies to which they belong, non-dues revenues (such as those that can be generated from publishing activities) become more important. Conway posited, however, that individual subscription sales are "a dead market" – non-members are most likely to access society content through their institution. "The days of selling a non-member subscription at twice the price of a member subscription are gone."

While authors, readers, reviewers and editors still cite journals as a primary benefit of society membership, we should consider what this means now that members are finding alternative means of professional communication, and content is readily available via other channels (in a recent Conway survey, 50% of respondents didn't attribute their "free" online access to their society membership.)

One pressure point that engendered discussion among the meeting participants was balancing the society's dual role of publishing a high-quality journal and meeting member needs, in the context of the tensions that can arise if members submit papers that aren't accepted for publication. The proliferation of research and the tendency toward "salami science" results in more papers, and higher rejection rates for journals that don't have room for more articles or that are focusing on increasing their impact factor. How can the society's strategy be positioned with members to avoid frustration? The growth in submissions also increases competition for reviewer services ("some reviewers are receiving dozens of requests each week") and societies must consider appropriate incentivization.

Publishing Partners

Competition for society publishing contracts is stronger than ever. Publishers are prepared to expose themselves to varying levels of risk to attract a society journal (with its own reputation and audience) into their portfolio. Managing that risk effectively can lead publishers to increase prices, but this should be considered carefully in the context of librarian expectations of society journals, which tend to be viewed as providing high-quality, prestigious content on terms that are compatible with the academic value system. To compound the risk, the economic recession is affecting commercial and institutional revenues in different ways; advertising in journals fell by up to 30% in 2009 and Conway cited an 85% decrease in reprint revenues for one journal. "It's outside of the control of owners and publishers to manage that," although there are signs of economic recovery in some disciplines.

Librarians

Librarians are increasingly assessing usage to help evaluate journals, so it behooves publishers to provide clear, actionable statistics for journals. They will also consider variables such as impact factors, price and recommendations of population served. Some institutions foresee the role of librarians fragmenting into repository publishers and purchasing agents. But “the institutional publishing venture is the ultimate in parochialism,” said Conway, with research readership restricted to institutional silos. The journal is more than an article repository; it’s an icon for quality, subject coverage, peer review and audience, with symbolic and intellectual value. Interlinked repositories, while technically providing access to all published papers, cannot replicate the ability of the journal to confer stature on its contributors. The trend of querying what value a publisher brings to the process shows that “we have failed in explaining what publishing means.”

As the volume of published materials grows and budgets shrink, librarians are increasing their negotiating power by consolidating into consortia. However, there is increasing resistance to “big deal” purchasing as librarians push to cherry-pick the titles they need and renegotiate pricing accordingly. Conway suspects consortia are “rife with politics and difficulties” as managers work to satisfy the multiple partners in each arrangement. “There will be unbundling at some level in the future,” predicted Conway, which could revitalize the librarian’s collection development function, but for now “singleton titles get lost, as all the energy is used up on big deals.” Initiatives like ALPSP’s Learned Journals Collection can help to counter this invisibility.

Society Members

Longitudinal studies show a decline in demand for print journals, although Conway also cited a study in which responses were mixed with equal preferences for online and print. Online advertising generates only a fraction of revenues from print advertising, so future format choices must be considered carefully despite environmental imperatives. Societies also need to consider more efficient ways to transfer knowledge in order to save members’ time; in some disciplines, researchers can spend up to 8 hours a week reading.

“Publish or perish” (for tenure and funding) is still a primary incentive for authors, who will always submit to the highest-impact journal in the first instance – an impact factor over 3 is the rule of thumb. Other variables in submission decisions include audience, reach (so societies should make sure they are publicizing their readership figures), time to decision and thoroughness of review. Journals are increasingly introducing a “manuscript triage” process to filter submissions (up to 50% of papers now go through triage instead of review) but this can be unpopular with authors and in any case still requires expert time; do society members still feel a loyalty toward the society journal when responding to requests to review? Should reviewers be incentivized, and if so, how? Conway cited a recent study in which several papers rejected by a particular journal had ended up in a higher impact journal, in some cases with several citations. The tendency is to assume an opportunity has been missed, but following discussion of particular examples, the group agreed that occasionally good papers are rightly rejected when the topic is not core for the society journal.

Editors are therefore under pressure to “be more deliberate in decision-making” and “think about the impact beyond face value” – while nonetheless having to increase their rejection rate in response to the growing volume of submissions and concerns about impact factors. “They know the impact factor is flawed, inaccurate and meaningless – but it’s still the coin of the realm.”

Facing the Future

Conway concluded that in setting future strategies, societies should:

- Seek input from all stakeholders
- Base plans on evidence (“don’t try to force the market to do things; you’re there to serve your membership”)
- Fund research on new features ahead of trying to monetize (“see if it adds value”)
- Let the market dictate the rate of change
- Partner with publishers to really understand what is driving journals
- Be open to new ideas and technologies.

During discussion, Duncan MacRae (Managing Editor, Neurosurgery) raised the issue of control in online advertising: “We used to have oversight on commercial products being placed near articles that might have referenced them. But in online advertising we’re not near the part of the process that places ads, even though we do get to approve them. Readers don’t know that ads are randomly placed – if they only go to the article once, and see the ad next to it, the conflict has occurred even if the ad would not have been there next time.” Conway recommended researching reader and member perceptions (to assess the scale of the problem) and, if necessary, developing detailed ad sales guidelines to limit the way in which advertising inventory is sold.

What Societies Want: Scanning the Research

Melinda Kenneway, Director of TBI Communications, interpreted results of a survey carried out by BMJ Journals to explore societies' perceptions of publishing challenges and opportunities. "We are in the foothills of massive change," suggested Kenneway. "How do we [societies] leverage the value of our relationships?" Many societies continue to experience membership growth and expect to see further international growth in particular. This raises issues of international awareness, collaboration, engagement. "We have to know and understand our members' needs and context – no single answer fits all."

Role of Societies

Respondents to the survey considered their core role to be meeting the needs of the discipline – over and above the needs of members – and did not consider creating a surplus to be a priority. However, in the context of publishing activities and expectations of publishing partnerships, surplus was a primary consideration. Communications with members, such as events and member newsletters, were considered important but Kenneway noted with surprise that very few respondents planned to replicate these activities online. School-level activities were also not considered a priority in the short term but "the education market is worth \$10 billion," pointed out Kenneway; "how might this change our publishing programs?"

Membership Benefits

As networking and communication media proliferate, many societies are concerned that members find society membership less valuable, and "try to fill that value gap with irrelevant services that members don't want – such as insurance discounts." This is "undermining the value of the society's principal functions" and not a sustainable solution. Societies need to focus services on personal and professional development opportunities – "grab that market and service it better," said Kenneway, citing the example of BMJ Journals' integration with the BMJ Learning platform – and the survey showed learning and Continuing Medical Education (CME) are recognized as major opportunities.

Future Generations

Respondents did not consider the different behaviors and expectations of the next generation as a threat, and only 5% saw new online communities as a significant threat. Nonetheless, they plan to prioritize development of online learning tools and Web 2.0 applications. Although there were mixed views about whether societies should own social networks, Kenneway argued that "societies need to have a finger on this button. We have the communities; we are the right place for this – the American Institute of Physics already has 24,000 sign ups to UniPHY [its scientific social network]. At the very least, make sure content can be integrated into social networks."

New Business Models

Survey respondents accepted that “OA [open access] is here to stay” and many are exploring ways in which current business models can be adjusted to accommodate OA. Although 27% of respondents were already repurposing content to experiment with other kinds of new business model – “we’ve been talking about it for 10 years and the only obstacle is getting the technology in place” – the fear of cannibalizing existing revenues means societies are “making conservative decisions” without carrying out market research to inform “proper market planning”. Recent decline in revenue, however, has led to “an acceptance that we have to do something.”

Market Intelligence

Kenneway identified a gap in the market for a market intelligence service focused on society publishers. Survey respondents did not value industry newsletters, discussion lists, trade associations or existing intelligence providers – perhaps because their remit is “too broad”. Most intelligence comes from members and publisher partners. Intelligence is key to societies’ ability to undertake the strategic market analysis that will allow them to define and approach new markets. “There’s an understanding gap,” said Kenneway, “and for lots of societies this is a big factor in choosing contract publishers.”

Looking Ahead

This is an exciting time for societies. There are lots of publishing opportunities to be built around “cradle-to-grave” member relationships; we can use technology to engage our communities and reach new audiences. Publications strategies will need to leverage quality and usability to capture budget released from canceled big deals. Strategic market analysis and planning will be important for identifying niche market opportunities, and as societies become more international, there is potential for local membership offerings and partnerships. “It’s about agility,” concluded Kenneway. “Societies need to take a more holistic approach to fully meet community needs, and this will require us to have a framework in place that enables quick reactions. Speed and responsiveness will be the only way to steer a safe course through oncoming challenges.”

What Societies Want: the Society's View

Edward (Ted) Shortliffe is the President and CEO of the American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA), and also Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Biomedical Informatics*. He spoke about issues specific to the relationship between a society and its publisher, in the context of his own experience. "The relationship with the publisher needs to be one of trust and respect. I've been around long enough to know that isn't always the case; there has to be mutual benefit, and it needs to be balanced."

Innovation

Publishers provide societies with expertise and tools, but new technologies and communication mechanisms mean that some scientists are questioning the role of the publisher. "One of the challenges for publishers is to make it clear what value they add." Publishers are a source of innovation: "a static text journal these days feels like something is missing; the notion of being on the 'cutting edge' is important and societies turn to publishers to help achieve that." A "modern online editing environment" that is tightly integrated and ensures smooth progression from submission through review to ongoing communication is required. "You don't want to build this yourself," warned Shortliffe. Editors need an up-to-date and easy-to-use contacts database to avoid using the same reviewers too frequently.

Transition

Before choosing a new publishing partner for the *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, AMIA asked members about the importance of the print edition. There was a strong preference for maintaining print, which "we took to heart," said Shortliffe; "we might otherwise have moved with the technology." But "we're at an inflection point where paper is beginning to mean less and less, at least in informatics." Authors naturally prefer that their article illustrations be replicated in color; the resulting page charges for print can encourage them ("when push comes to shove") to prefer online access in lieu of paper, particularly since online publishing is also better able to support open access. "It's a rapidly moving target" that still presents difficult decisions for societies and publishers. For some clinical journals, the bigger issue in the transition to online is the role of advertising. "It requires some fundamental rethinking about revenues" and "new sources" besides pharmaceutical company advertising.

Reputation and Ethics

A publisher's reputation affects perceptions of the society's journal; where a publisher does not have a positive reputation, this can present problems "no matter how good the service is." Shortliffe has had experience with individuals refusing to review for a journal solely to avoid expressing support for the publisher. "That may not be a rational reaction but it's real." Societies also expect publishers to provide leadership on ethical issues such as dual publication, conflicts of interest and plagiarism.

Sales and Marketing

Societies expect publishers to deliver “nimble, internally coordinated” commercial services that demonstrate commitment to the society’s field (promoting content as a group if they publish more than one journal in a broad discipline, and demonstrating a full understanding of the list in how they market and display products.) Publishers also need to provide support for multiple kinds of publications, for example, magazines as well as scientific journals. “It’s not just about getting into institutional bundles,” explained Shortliffe. “It’s about new markets, environments, workflows and tools.” Publishers should also help societies to experiment with creative use of social media and alternative delivery channels such as mobile. “My associate editors have been asked innumerable times by the publishers of our journals to start sending tweets, but they don’t want to sign up to Twitter themselves – they don’t believe, viscerally, that it has value.”

Challenges

- Maintaining a viable business model, in the face of unproven alternatives such as open access, particularly when members demonstrate a preference – Shortliffe talked of “the tension between the desire to make information available and the realities of what it costs to do so.”
- Differences between disciplines. The biological community is much more committed to the open access movement than the clinical community is; for a field like biomedical informatics, where members come from both clinical and biological research communities, there is a lack of unanimity about how best to generate ongoing revenue.
- Conflict between editorial and business perspectives. Where a society’s philosophy supports a hands-off editorial process (“untainted by society interference”), it is important to be clear about where ultimate responsibility lies for different types of decisions.

The last half hour of the meeting featured a lively discussion among participants; topics included plagiarism, open access, alternative business models, advertising, usage, and social media.

Plagiarism

Publishers also support societies by providing leadership on issues such as dual publication, conflicts of interest and plagiarism; BMJ Journals, for example, was one of the founding members of the Committee on Publication Ethics (publicationethics.org), which advises on good practice, provides tools and funds research relating to publication misconduct. **Ted Shortliffe** noted that responsibility for identifying and addressing plagiarism at AMIA rests with the editors, with support from the society if the problem is particularly acute. "But the tricky part is finding it," with most instances being uncovered by "serendipity," for example when two journals send the same paper to the same reviewer at the same time. Shortliffe referred to a 2006 statement from seven major informatics journal editors [*JAMIA* 2006:13:113–114], which proposed that repeat offenders should be blacklisted and banned from future submissions. **Tad Campion**, **NEJM Online Editor and Senior Deputy Editor at the New England Journal of Medicine**, pointed out that tools like iThenticate and TurnItIn are making it easier to find plagiarism, but that there are associated costs.

Open Access

In discussing who should meet these costs, the discussion moved onto open access, which "pushes in the direction of a posting service", said **Campion**, and threatens to "erode the quality

and thoroughness of peer review". **Shortliffe** agreed that "there is a notion that the publisher doesn't add value and faculty could coordinate [publication] among themselves," but noted that "OA doesn't mean you don't have the resources to support quality publishing – they just come from somewhere else." As OA grants and subsidies have begun to dry up, author fees have started to increase and revealed a split between those authors still willing to fund OA publishing and those who prefer the traditional subscription model; the hybrid journal model supports both.

Business Models

Laura McLellan, **Editorial Assistant at the *Annals of Family Medicine***, described the unusual business model adopted by the *Annals*, which is free at the point of access and supported by sponsoring organizations. "It's a bit precarious," she acknowledged, "but it's possible." The journal is an independent non-profit organization, not owned by any of the supporting societies, that has been operating successfully for seven years. "Not everyone can do this, but some societies need to stop thinking about their journals as revenue generators."

Funding

Laura McLellan encouraged the group to consider what could be learned from the newspaper industry. For **Tad Campion**, referencing the *Huffington Post*, the lesson is that "it's easier to start up online at low cost than to take a highly respected publication and change." **Consultant Kathey Alexander** pointed out that major newspapers are now trying to revert to paid-access models, having tried giving content away free. "We're also seeing a limited number of scholarly journals that went OA and are now

trying to put part of it back in the bottle and hope somebody will pay for it." **McLellan** asked about the BMJ's strategy in this context. "We gave everything away for 10 years," said **Peter Ashman**, adding that the resulting high levels of online traffic did not translate to high advertising revenues. Non-research content in the BMJ is now behind access control for the four years after publication. "In order to continue making research content freely available, we're asking authors who have received a publication fee as part of their funding to give that to us." **McLellan** asked whether researchers are talking to major funders about including publication fees in funding; "it will become more prevalent," said **Ashman**, "as mandated OA increases. But not every funding body does at the moment."

Content vs Services

Melinda Kenneway referenced one society that is strategically preparing for a five-year scenario in which it won't be able to charge for content and instead will need to build on services that enrich information and help people to find and manipulate it. "That's the opportunity for us," said **Kenneway**, "but the risk is that someone else will beat us to it." Publishers need to determine how they are going to appeal to different communities and guide them to relevant content. There will be "a shift in terms of where the serious money [in publishing] will come from. Revenue per article is declining fast," continued **Kenneway**, who predicted the demise of "publishers that rely on the original research article as a main source of revenue."

Advertising

Tad Champion suggested that online advertising would defray only some of the costs of future digital publishing, given the number and variety of

platforms publishers will need to serve (particularly in the handheld market). The traditional subscription model [for individuals] doesn't support the easy, free access that users now expect. Institutional site licenses and even national site licenses may play a greater role in the "feels free" economy. "But what if new market entrants, with new business models and processes, force us to cut the costs of the publishing process?" countered **Kenneway**, referencing the *Frontiers in Neuroscience* project, which has disintermediated the publisher and in which referees and authors communicate directly.

Distributed Entry Points

The group moved to discussing the impact of distributed usage, for example, when the full text of articles is posted to aggregator sites such as PubMedCentral (PMC). AMIA allows this, in line with NIH funding requirements, and plans to measure the effect on the journal's subscription sales and impact factor. In the context of previous discussions, **Ted Shortliffe** expressed concern that AMIA "is not getting eye contact" with users who access *JAMIA* via PMC. They are unaware of enhancements to the journal on its home site, and "we can't put ads on PubMedCentral." **Kate Nikkel of the Radiological Society of North America** added that distributed usage will increase the cost per download on the home site, which can affect library renewal decisions. But "it's about putting content where the users are," said **Melinda Kenneway** – "offering a single point of entry," agreed **Carolyn Simpkins of the BMJ Group**.

Social Media

The event closed with a discussion of social media. **Tad Champion** described *NEJM's* editors' decision

not to start a Facebook group for the journal, only to discover that one had already been set up by “fans”. “We thanked them, took it on, and we’ve got 90,000 followers.” But is that good? asked **Melinda Kenneway**. “We need to decide how best to measure the impact of social media.” The group agreed that publishers need to stay in the conversation, wherever it takes place, but that it’s best to let the community share content on our behalf. “We need to monitor social media and pick up on feedback, rather than try to direct it,” said **Gordon Wilson, Head of Marketing at the BMJ Group**. **Duncan MacRae, Managing Editor of *Neurosurgery***, explained his journal’s

“relatively narrow” social media objective of traffic generation, and described the impact on website traffic of a *Neurosurgery* article citation in the Huffington Post: “hits went from 2,500 a day to 21,000 over a two day period. In all this time, nobody commented on our article. But there were hundreds of comments on the Huffington Post.” Why? MacRae explained: “In that forum, commenting is more the norm, so our article found its way to a place where it could generate interest.” The lesson is “not being concerned about where this thing ends up,” and focusing instead on objectives: ultimately, “we have data that shows people clicking through to read the article.”

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