Publishing during a pandemic: Resilience and change

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Key points
• The scholarly publishing industry must be prepared to step back, consider our value, reset our relationships, and be prepared to accept and embrace real change.
• Three areas of focus during these times should be (1) the importance of community; (2) racism, bias, and structural inequities; and (3) openness, transparency, and trust.
• We need to recognize the importance of the humanities and social sciences, as well as of science, technology, and medicine in addressing the impacts of the pandemic.

In his book ‘The Fourth Industrial Revolution’ (Schwab, 2017), Klaus Schwab, Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, observes that ‘the speed of innovation in terms of both its development and diffusion is faster than ever’. The same might be said of the pace of change more broadly. On a personal level, 2020 has felt strangely bifurcated in this regard. Lockdown caused by the pandemic has made some everyday things seem to slow down. The lack of daily commute and no dashing from one place to another for meetings. But the pace of change in transitioning how we work, everything being online while we are home rather than in offices, has been extremely rapid.

Despite restrictions and months away from physical research institutions, researchers have continued to submit manuscripts which we have continued to edit, review, and publish. For the readers and users of research information, discovery has continued, and access to the literature online has been largely uninterrupted. Many of the challenges seen in the early phases of the pandemic around access to printed materials have been resolved. All of this has been achieved thanks to the commitment and effort of people right across scholarly publishing, libraries, and universities.

As Pippa Smart highlighted in her editorial in the July issue Publishing during pandemic: Innovation, collaboration, and change (Smart, 2020), publishers initiated, or participated in, a range of initiatives to support research, researchers, and librarians during the pandemic. These included increased collaboration across publishers to increase efficiency of peer review (Greaves & Treadway, 2020 and see https://oaspa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Greaves-Speeding-up-peer-review-and-manuscript-publication-during-COVID-19-can-collaboration-work-3-1.pdf), bringing coronavirus research out from behind paywalls, and facilitation of off-campus access including through initiatives such as the CCC’s Education Continuity License in the USA.

Those of you working at, or with, learned societies will likely have seen changes to the society’s offerings and interactions with members due to the impact of the pandemic. Robert Harrington’s recent Scholarly Kitchen post (Harrington, 2020) shares data showing that many societies are cutting back activities and having to repurpose their programmes. ALPSP has experienced this too. Transitioning from in-person to online events, including for our recent annual meeting, has been challenging. And working out how to remain as engaged with our members when our traditional means of networking and connecting are not available to us has not been simple. But we also recognize that with challenge comes opportunity. We were delighted to be able to increase the diversity of those who both participated in and attended this year’s ALPSP conference due to the meeting being online. These positive outcomes challenge us to retain this inclusivity when physical meeting becomes possible again and highlight the importance of enabling participation for those for whom travel or time away is a barrier.

As Pippa’s July editorial concludes (Smart, 2020) ‘the future is bright for those who embrace change and demonstrate value’. I echo her message. There is much opportunity, but taking...
advantage of it is contingent on being prepared to step back, consider our value, reset our relationships, and be prepared to accept and embrace real change.

There are three areas in particular where I see a need for us to focus our attention – which is not to say these are the only three, but these are the ones I have seen come to the fore throughout this year. They are:

- Recognizing the importance of community;
- Addressing racism, bias, and structural inequity; and
- Embracing the importance of openness, transparency, and trust.

In 2017, I had the opportunity to participate in a workshop facilitated by the Royal Society of Biology and Research Consulting, looking at the impact of the transition to open access on UK Learned Societies (www.research-consulting.com/learned-societies-open-access/). While the majority of discussion was specifically about the OA transition, as part of the event, we were asked to identify what we saw as the biggest risks to our organizations over the coming period. As far as I remember, no one anticipated a pandemic of the kind that we have seen this year, but what was highlighted was that one of the biggest risks was risk aversion! In hesitating to embrace the changes happening around us, we miss the opportunity to keep pace with the evolving needs of our communities.

The need to reassess and reconsider our core mission and how we can best deliver this is challenging, particularly for membership organizations. We must consider how to balance the tradition and activities that our members value while managing the conditions in which we find ourselves. To do that, we need to be open to new ideas and to understand the needs and challenges of our communities. And be prepared to hear difficult feedback and share ideas that may not be popular.

But as many of us feel dislocated by the pandemic, a sense of community continues to be important both for us and for all those with whom we work. Maintaining and strengthening our connections is an important part of retaining our value.

In focusing on our connections, we have been hearing loud and clear from our communities and colleagues that we must address bias and inequity both in the research ecosystem and within the scholarly publishing community. Systemic racism and inequality have been highlighted through the impact of the pandemic, and we need to address the marginalization of underrepresented groups.

The imbalance in our workforce is evidenced in the results of the Workplace Equity Project survey published earlier this year (Taylor, Spirika, Monahan, Mulhern, & Wachter, 2020). The data show that, of survey respondents, 96% had a bachelor’s degree or higher, 76% were female, 83% heterosexual, 81% White, and 89% report no disabilities, while a greater number of those in leadership roles identified as male and White than in the sample as a whole. We need to do better at recognizing and addressing this lack of diversity and inequity, including through the structural barriers that have maintained the status quo.

Initiatives such as the Coalition for Diversity & Inclusion in Scholarly Communication (C4DISC, https://c4disc.org), of which ALPSP is a member, are important to drive tangible change. C4DISC’s aim is to ‘promote involvement, innovation, and expanded access to leadership opportunities that maximize engagement across identity groups and professional levels’. We need to show concrete progress against this goal in order to begin to become a community that welcomes and celebrates difference and all those who wish to participate.

Complementing the work of C4DISC are initiatives such as the ‘Joint commitment for action on inclusion and diversity in publishing’ led by the Royal Society of Chemistry and signed by over 30 organizations (www.rsc.org/new-perspectives/talent/joint-commitment-for-action-inclusion-and-diversity-in-publishing/). This focuses on recognizing and eliminating biases in scholarly publishing and driving positive change. There is much work to do, and we are only at the beginning of this process, but recognizing the issues and committing to address them is an important first step.

In considering our communities, inclusion, and equity, we also need to consider the global nature of research and publishing. The impact of the pandemic may also accelerate change in the global distribution of research investment and, consequently, of scholarly publications. The 2008 financial crisis had a varied impact on research investment and output in different regions as documented in the UNESCO Science Report: Towards 2030 (Ed. Susan Schneegans, 2015). It will be interesting to see the next iteration of the report, due to be published in April 2021. Although much of the data will undoubtedly come from pre-COVID-19 times, we may be able to see the initial impacts and signs of change. Charting the course of research outputs over the next years will be interesting and important for all of us. How these will evolve after the pandemic we do not yet know, but we do know that it will be more important than ever to understand the experience of our communities of researchers, editors, and reviewers. And to hear and understand these experiences, we must become more diverse and challenge our preconceptions.

As we have moved through this year, we have heard a lot of discussion about ‘following the science’ in responding to the pandemic. Whether or not the actions taken are truly following the science draws attention to the risks in overlooking the importance of the humanities and social sciences in addressing the impacts of the pandemic and charting our course to the post-pandemic world. Now more than ever is the time to increase our multidisciplinarity and consider global challenges in the round, rather than siloing according to discipline, region, or other boundaries.

We have seen increasing focus on Open Science (and, more broadly, Open Research) through this year. The recent joint call for Open Science from UNESCO, WHO, and the UN High Commissioner highlights the importance of trust in information and addressing inequalities (https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-who-and-high-commissioner-human-rights-call-open-science). The transition to an open and transparent ecosystem is an important part of addressing the issues in research culture highlighted in the Wellcome report ‘What researchers think about the culture...
they work in’ (Wellcome, 2020), as well as to ensure that, as an integral part of the research process, scholarly publishing continues to enable sharing and discovery of trusted information.

Through publication ethics, peer review, and open science mandates, we are used to setting standards for our research communities. The principles of openness, trust, and transparency that we discuss with our communities, particularly through the transition to an open scholarship system, are ones we should also set for ourselves. Increasing adoption of open data practices, including through the STM Association’s ‘STM 2020 Research Data Year’ (www.stm-assoc.org/standards-technology/2020-stm-research-data-year/) and the Plan S price and service transparency frameworks developed by Information Power and the Fair Open Access Alliance (www.coalition-s.org/price-and-service-transparency-frameworks/), are indicators of the increasing importance of finding signals of trust in an open system.

Consideration of new business models that widen access to research and research-sharing are an integral part of this. ALPSP continues to represent the interests of our members through initiatives such as the SPA-OPS Project (Wise & Estelle, 2019), ALPSP’s initiative with Wellcome and Information Power to support learned societies and smaller publishers in the transition to Open Access, and the work earlier this year specifically focusing on transformation in low- and middle-income countries (www.alpsp.org/news/Page-4/project-to-explore-oa-agreements-news-feb2020), the first example of which was between EIFL and IWA Publishing and was announced in October (www.informationpower.co.uk/first-cost-neutral-oa-agreement-between-eifl-and-society-publisher-iwa-publishing/). As the landscape evolves we will continue to support you and represent your views.

We know that these challenges and others remain, but the resilience and ability of our community to problem-solve, be inventive and open to debate will serve us well. If we can grow to become more open, diverse, inclusive, and equitable, we will be well-placed to address the challenges that come our way.

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