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What Do Editors Want?: Assessing a Growing Library Publishing Program and Finding Creative Solutions to Unmet Needs

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Abstract

The University of Rhode Island (URI) University Libraries publishes five active open access, peer-reviewed scholarly journals on our DigitalCommons@URI platform. Our journal publishing program has grown slowly but steadily over the last decade, with new services added incrementally as needed. In early 2019, we conducted three focus group interviews with nine editors and assistants representing all of the journals on our platform in order to assess our journal publishing efforts. We asked editors to identify the successes, challenges, and unmet needs that they have encountered in the publishing process and what resources they have found to support their journals outside of library offerings. We highlight what we learned from our editors: what they value, what they need, and what they want from library publishing services. We also outline our plans going forward to facilitate ongoing conversations among editors and to find creative solutions to help them with their biggest challenges.

Our Project

The University of Rhode Island Libraries publishes six open access, peer-reviewed scholarly journals (five active; one ceased) on our DigitalCommons@URI platform. Each journal is very different and was set up on our publishing platform at various times over the past decade, with the library adding new support services as needed. Since our journal publishing program has grown incrementally, without an overall plan, we decided it was a good time to assess our services by asking editors to identify the successes, challenges, and unmet needs that they have encountered in the publishing process. We wanted to hear what was working and what was not, so that we could streamline and improve our publishing program.

In addition, besides the services offered by the libraries, we knew that editors were finding other resources to support their journals, and we wanted to learn more about this. Not only would editors' strategies in finding resources be helpful for us to know, but we thought they might be useful for other open access journal editors and librarians working in library publishing services. To this end, we conducted a series of focus group interviews with journal editors and their assistants.

Background

On the whole, library publishing at the University of Rhode Island is characterized more by a bottom-up than a top-down approach. With only one librarian

and one staff member involved in publishing services, and with library publishing only a small part of their jobs, our services are limited. Nonetheless, as the number of journals we publish has grown over the years, we have been able to incrementally add to and improve our services.

The University Libraries maintains a contract with bepress for the Digital Commons platform, coordinates the setup of new journals on the platform, and assists (often extensively) with migrating content and metadata to DigitalCommons@URI from other systems. We also apply for an ISSN on each journal's behalf, as well as for a listing in the *Directory of Open Access Journals*. We maintain a contract with Crossref and train editors in creating digital object identifiers (DOIs). Finally, we respond quickly to questions and problems from editors and their assistants.

Journals Published

A brief overview of the five current journals published on DigitalCommons@URI will provide a clearer picture of our publishing program for the context of this study.

Our newest journal, the *Journal of International Engineering Education* (ISSN: 2640-9283), was established in the fall of 2018. Its predecessor journal, the *Online Journal of Global Engineering Education* (ISSN: 1933-1703), which has ceased publication, was the first journal hosted on DigitalCommons@URI in 2006. The journal grew out of a colloquium on international engineering education, an area in which

the University of Rhode Island is a leader. Two of the journal's editors are based at URI and one is based at Purdue University; three assistant editors are "early career" engineering faculty from other institutions.

The *Journal of Media Literacy Education* (ISSN: 2167-8715) is the official journal of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. It has been in existence for 10 years, having migrated to DigitalCommons@URI from Open Journal Systems about six years ago after the arrival at URI of its founding editor, Renee Hobbs, a professor of communication studies. The *Journal of Media Literacy Education* has published over 250 articles with over 235,000 total downloads.

Founded as a new journal about three years ago, *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence* (ISSN: 2472-4181) is an interdisciplinary journal. The journal's founding editor, Donna Hughes, is a professor of gender and women's studies at URI and a well-known expert in human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Professor Hughes perceived that people in the community working on these issues often knew more than academic researchers and that there was a need for a forum to openly disseminate their knowledge. She had also experienced "gatekeeper bias" in existing journals. Frustrated, she decided to start her own journal, at our suggestion. *Dignity* has been quite successful, with over 100 articles published and over 80,000 downloads.

Markets, Globalization & Development Review (ISSN: 2473-4055) was established in July 2016, after years of planning dating back to 2009. At that time, the founding editor Nikhilesh Dholakia, a professor of marketing at URI, believed that choosing a long-standing, subscription-based publisher might be the easiest way to proceed. However, this concerned him because, as he explained, "our journal is . . . global, with strong interest from developing nations, where budgets are much lower than here . . . the issue of cost and access (especially by developing world faculty) is serious" (N. Dholakia, personal communication, July 29, 2009). For this reason, he and the academic society sponsoring the journal, the International Society of Markets and Development, chose to publish on DigitalCommons@URI. In addition to Professor Emeritus Dholakia, the journal is co-edited by Professor Deniz Atik from University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. MGDR has published over 70 articles that have been downloaded close to 35,000 times.

After one of its co-editors, Jeannette Riley, was hired as URI's dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the

Journal of Feminist Scholarship (ISSN: 2158-6179) migrated from its own Web platform to DigitalCommons@URI in 2019. The journal was previously based at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, and it still receives some support from this institution since most of the co-editors are faculty there. Dean Riley is interested in integrating the journal with URI's Gender and Women's Studies program and in getting students involved in its production.

Project Design

For each of the five active journals published on DigitalCommons@URI, we sent requests for interviews to all editors and other individuals identified as playing a significant role in the journals' production. We conducted three focus group discussions with nine total interviewees, representing all five journals. We led the discussions by asking a number of questions, including, "Why did you choose to publish a journal on DigitalCommons@URI?", "Of the assistance provided by the URI Libraries in publishing your journal, what have you found to be the most helpful?", "Are there any services that would be helpful to you that we do not currently offer?", "What do you find is the greatest challenge to managing ongoing publishing operations?", "Have you found any resources outside of the URI Libraries' publishing services to support your publishing operations?", and "How has being an editor of an open access journal informed your career as a scholar?"

Common Themes—What Is Working

In terms of library support for publishing, there seemed to be a general consensus among our focus group participants on what is working well. Participants reported that they valued the assistance of librarians and staff with their journals' initial setup on the DigitalCommons@URI platform and our ongoing support with problems at the "point of crisis." Interviewees found bepress technical support to be responsive and accommodating and generally viewed the Digital Commons platform favorably. They particularly valued the availability of journal metrics and the shareable dashboards, which editors had used to promote their journals; the flexibility of the platform; and the fact that it is fairly intuitive to use after an initial learning curve.

Common Themes—What Is Not Working

The number one complaint we heard from editors related to copy-editing. Nearly every interviewee

reported that copy-editing is time-consuming and stressful, and they noted that not everyone is good at it. They recognized its importance, however, since inaccuracies can undermine the credibility of a journal. Related to this was a complaint that templating and layout of articles is also onerous and must be done outside of the bepress platform.

Another concern was the amount of time and energy required to keep a journal going, that there was too much work for too few people. One participant commented, “Our editor is headed for a nervous breakdown.”

Editors were also concerned about getting their journals included in indexing services, particularly Scopus and Web of Science. They valued the role of DOIs in the publishing ecosystem but found creating DOIs and complying with Crossref’s requirements to be difficult. A number of editors had obtained one-time resources to support their journals’ initial setup, but resources to support ongoing operations or to add new features were lacking. Editors desired “cutting-edge” features, for example a field for author ORCID numbers and linked citation references, but they didn’t know where to turn for guidance on these matters.

Outside Resources

We asked our focus group participants about what resources, outside of the services offered by the URI Libraries and bepress, they had found to support their journals’ operations. We were curious about sources of funding and labor as well as publishing tools and other technologies. We found that the editors were being quite creative and using resources of which we were not aware.

In some cases, editors had obtained small institutional grants or had used startup money to support their journals. One journal received some funding from another institution. In a couple of cases, editors paid out-of-pocket for services to support their journals, for example Constant Contact for marketing the journal and the paid version of Grammarly to detect errors in grammar and style. One editor uses Recite Works to catch citation and reference list mismatches.

In terms of labor, editors relied on volunteers from their scholarly communities and parent organizations. They enlisted freelance or volunteer help with tasks such as the design of website elements

and templates. They hired students, either hourly or through assistantships, and also relied on unpaid student labor through internships or independent studies for credit.

What Do Editors Want?

There were a number of services that our editors wished the URI Libraries could provide. Their number one desire was for help with copy-editing, designing templates, and other “editorial assistant” types of tasks, since such assistance would free the editors to focus on the journals’ content. More than one editor wanted guidance and further information on how to get their journal indexed in Scopus and Web of Science to better attract potential authors. Editors saw an opportunity for students to become involved in journal production and marketing and wished that the library could coordinate (and fund) students working in this area. Our journal editors also saw a role for the library in marketing. While editors are already promoting their journals through social media and e-mail lists and are sharing their journals’ metrics from the Digital Commons dashboard, they felt that they needed help with outreach both to readers and to potential authors and reviewers.

Importance of Open Access

When we asked our editors how editing an open access journal had informed their careers as scholars, we learned that, for them, open access is not an abstract concept; rather, it means making real, tangible connections with other scholars and communities, often on a global scale. For example, we learned that the editors of the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* discovered an “organic media literacy movement” in the Philippines, of which they had not been aware, from the “hundreds and hundreds” of downloads coming from that part of the world. Open access has helped their journal attain a global reach, with submissions from Nigeria, Brazil, and China, as the media literacy movement grows around the globe.

For the editors of the *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, open access is a feminist issue. It enables their journal to connect scholars and others outside academia who are making important contributions to the feminist movement. Similarly, the editor of *Dignity* has created a “frontline reports” section to highlight contributions from nonacademics and facilitate real-world connections between those who are working to end sexual exploitation and violence.

She has become a well-informed advocate of open access, for example reaching beyond the boundaries of traditional journal publishing to implement an “acknowledged peer review” system that gives peer reviewers the option to be thanked for their services.

Next Steps

Our focus group interviews helped us better understand the challenges that journal editors face and gave us ideas for some simple improvements we could make in our library publishing services. It also provided us with some goals for future services. We have already improved our documentation for new editors getting started with publishing a journal on the DigitalCommons@URI platform, and we plan to enhance future training for editors and assistants who are in the early stages of the journal setup process. We also believe that it would be relatively easy

for us to assist with DOIs. Bigger goals for the future include looking into creating a pipeline for URI students who are interested in participating in journal production, exploring the feasibility of assisting with copy-editing and inclusion in indexing services, and thinking of ways to better demonstrate the value of the library’s publishing program to administrators.

Perhaps the most significant takeaway of our focus group interviews, however, was the enthusiasm expressed by the editors and their assistants about the opportunity to speak with us and with each other. The editors were passionate about their journals, and this resulted in lively focus group discussions with cross-pollination of ideas and sharing of experiences, questions, and solutions. As a result, we plan to organize regular opportunities for editors at URI to communicate with each other, and with us, such as an “editor coffee hour.” As one editor declared, “This was better than therapy!”