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ATG Special Report -- Peer, Review: Past Present and Future

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ATG Special Report — Peer, Review: Past Present and Future

by **Steve McKinzie** (Social Science Librarian, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA 17013; Phone: 717-245-1601)
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This issue of *Against the Grain* tackles the troubling and sometimes vexing question of peer review. We subtitled it: "Peer, Review: Past Present and Future, in the hope that an expanded scope would grant contributors sufficient latitude for cogent and diverse analysis. They didn't disappoint us, as you'll see shortly.

Peer review itself has enormous relevance for scholars and publishers, but it is especially important for librarians saddled with the task of building collections.

What could be more valuable in the collection development process than having a tool that helps you buy the best of what the scholarly world has to offer? Peer review, the handy utensil of collection management, attempts to guarantee quality — to separate the wheat from the chaff, the professional from the amateur, and the experienced researcher from the would-be popularizer. It is the *modus operandi*, of scholarly credibility. Built on the insistence that only the experts in a given field have the ability, training, and understanding to judge the quality of a scholar's work, peer review allows disciplines to police themselves, and it enables scholars to keep their scholarly professional literature unbiased and accurate.

Such, at least, is how the theory goes, but even in the best of worlds, peer review is an all too human process. **Mark Herring** argues in his regular Red Herring column that accompanies this issue that peer review doesn't necessarily ensure quality and that it doesn't always work as it should. Fabrication and absurdity can still pass for scholarship — and peer-reviewed scholarship at that. As usual, **Dean Herring's** sobering and sometimes irreverent analysis is well worth reading.

Gerry McKiernan takes up peer review from a different angle altogether in his article, "Peer Review in the Internet Age: Five (5) Easy Pieces." He agrees that peer review is a form of quality control, but he insists that it isn't the only one on the block. There are others — additional means of keeping the standards of scholarship high. He explains several, pointing out the strengths and advantages of some of the models, live options that the scholarly community would do well to consider closely.

Barbara Fister has a fascinating piece entitled "Academic Authors and the Crisis in Publishing. She asks us to consider why scholars publish and whether or not the entire academic reward system itself may be to blame for creating a publishing system that seems more interested in quantity than quality, more concerned about bestowing author credibility than gaining true understanding.

Of course, no one can take up any of these questions about peer review — the issues addressed by **Fister**, **Herring**, and **McKiernan** without encountering what some have called "the scholarly communication crisis." With the cost of journals going up substantially, particularly commercially-owned journals, some universities, scholars and even governments are calling on publishers to lower their prices or face a bevy of unsavory consequences. The extended hullabaloo over scholarly journal prices coincides with the online explosion, a development that has also given us the intriguing new publishing paradigm, **Open Access**. **Peter Suber**, a scholar who has emerged as one of the international champions of the new approach, argues in his article "A primer for **Open Access** to Science and Scholarship" that the movement holds enormous promise, especially for academic institutions caught in the grip of escalating serial expenditures. By transferring costs away from the consumer — be it the library or a personal subscriber, and to the author, **Open Access** can encourage the sharing of scholarly information, foster the free exchange of ideas, and solve the bedeviling problem of copyright, all at a modest cost.

In tandem with **Suber**, an additional article offers a variation on the theme of **Open Access**. **Beverlee French**, **Catherine Candee**, and **John Ober** discuss their involvement with the **California Digital Library (CDL)**. By sponsoring their own online repository, the **University of California** has created in **CDL** a scholarly commons, a place where scholars can publish freely, without the reliance on commercial publishing but with the safeguards of traditional peer review.

For some, these arguments in favor of peer-reviewed **Open Access** may appear to be too good to be true. **Michael Mabe**, Director of Academic Relations with **Elsevier** Publishing suggests that such is precisely the case. He suggests that the advocates of **OA** have overstated their case. In his article, "Peer Review and Pay-to-Publish: The World Turned Upside Down?" he contends that to date a plethora of objections about **Open Access** remain largely unanswered. He mentions a few. Is it really economically feasible? Will the practice of having authors pay for publication corrupt the reviewing process? Can publishers themselves, desperately in need of funds, resist the tendency to publish more than they should, given the fact that the actual quantity of their publishing (the sheer number of articles themselves) is directly proportional to their profits? In short, **Open Access** for **Mabe** doesn't have the answers. It is in the end more a symptom of the scholarly communication crisis than it is any kind of solution.

Finally, my own opinion piece, "Open Access: Two Caveats," offers a personal take on the traditional publishing and **Open Access** controversy. Like most librarians, I find **OA** enormously attractive, and I fancy that the new approach to journal publishing is destined to become part of the publishing landscape. Even so, I recommend caution. **Open Access** has disturbing dimensions that none of us can dismiss too quickly. At the very least, we ought to give traditional publishers a fair and impartial hearing — something that some librarians and some parts of the scholarly community seem reluctant or unable to grant. My sense is that at this point in the debate, we all (publishers, scholars and librarians alike) need to answer a good many more questions about **Open Access** before we can give it unqualified support. 🐼

Reshaping Scholarly Communication

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For academic libraries and librarians it is impossible to know the future landscape of scholarly communication. But it is necessary to wonder about it, and imperative to act. By now many of the facts are known. There is mounting evidence of the economic unsustainability of current scholarly communication systems.¹ Unhappiness about the trends and a desire by all parties to have a healthy system for disseminating and managing the results of scholarship are leading to an amazing variety of actions. Witness the parliamentary investigations, the flood of speculation and pontificating, reports in the

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