November 2013

People Profile: Jesse Holden

Editor
2. Perceived obfuscation of journal publishing that prevents a nuanced comparison of cost-effectiveness, and
3. Tension concerning coverage and quality between not-for-profit and commercial publishing.

And now things start to get interesting…

A short blurb (presented here in its entirety) notes that the “Chronicle of Higher Education for January 24 has a letter from the American Institute of Physics and the American Physical Society giving responses to the Gordon & Breach issue.” Whenever an “issue” gets its own name, one can assume that it has achieved a certain threshold of public consciousness. However, once the issue fades, so, too, does public consciousness. I am quite certain that I have never heard of “The Gordon & Breach Issue,” though it is likely many who were part of that milieu still remember quite a bit about it.

Further along, things get even more perplexing. Two letters composed by Duane Webster (who, in 1990, had just recently been appointed ARL’s executive director) are printed on page 29. The first letter, dated January 19, poses a question to ARL directors about a mysterious survey issued by The Foundation for International Scientific Cooperation. Information about The Foundation and the purpose of its survey seemed to be almost nonexistent and, not surprisingly, suspicious. The revelations of the second letter, also addressed to ARL directors and dated January 24, are further informed by some of the information I have noted above. The Foundation’s survey was posted using a meter registered to Gordon & Breach (see above) who, Webster writes, “as you are aware, … is conducting a lawsuit against Dr. Barschall, The American Institute of Physics, and The American Physical Society” (see above).

Shifting gears, but very much related to what has proceeded, is what might be described as a two-page “info-tisement” (is it an ad? is it an article?) that covers pages 14 and 15. The title, running across the two pages reads: “INFORMATION from Elsevier Science Publishers.” The pages are divided into upper and lower registers. The top one is devoted to brief synopses of the key elements in the journal publishing process: peer review, speed of publication, society affiliations, page charging, advertising sales. The lower register identifies major scientific journal types (“academic research journal (commercial),” “academic research journal (society),” “professional journal (commercial),” etc.) and lists several characteristics of publishing each kind of journal (“no page charges,” “refereeing is rigorous,” etc.). It is, perhaps, all too easy to suspect a conspiracy when Elsevier does something a little out of the ordinary. However, this info-tisement struck me as a bit weird and really cemented in my mind that the discursive formation being articulated within this ATG issue was not about value, per se, but about anxiety about value.

Back to the Midwinter coverage, a summary of the Publisher/Vendor/Library Relations Committee reveals that the committee unanimously agreed to support a resolution forwarded by ALA and ALCTS “supporting publication and studies concerning the comparative cost of scientific and technical journals publishing and disapproval of litigation in response to such studies.” Here we learn that Dr. Barschall is being sued for a Physics Today article calculating cost-effectiveness of 200 physics journals, which definitely helps explain some things.

The last featured write-up in this issue of ATG is a “Resolution on Free Scholarly Discourse,” which was “passed at ALA Midwinter,” reproduced without editorial comment, and presumably the same one unanimously supported by the Publisher/Vendor/Library Relations Committee. The resolution affirms that “analysis, publication, and dissemination of studies and other information concerning the competitive costs of such materials and services are of vital importance to the library community.” The resolution ultimately concludes “that the American Library Association disapproves the use of litigation for the purposes of discouraging the publication of such studies and information rather than engaging in the exchange of views and scholarly debate.” Certainly the timing of such a resolution is not coincidental.

So, in sum, we have a panel discussion, a lawsuit, some “INFORMATION from Elsevier Science Publishers,” and an ALA resolution. At this point, we have something that started out continued on page 79