

Enter into dialogue

Report from the GeSIG Bookfair Meeting held in Frankfurt 20th October 2016

Thomas Mutschler¹

Opportunities for dialogue between participants in the market for academic content are well-established at the national level. Although libraries are facing similar challenges and industry trends are becoming increasingly globalized, there has for a number of years been no forum available to stimulate discussions and exchange of experiences across borders. The meeting organized by the German Serials Interest Group (GeSIG) took place for the first time at the Frankfurt Bookfair in 2016. It provided an opportunity for a number of librarians, subscription agents and publishers from a range of countries to enter into dialogue on key issues facing the world of scholarly information today.

Experts and representatives from a number of libraries, subscription agencies and publishers followed the invitation of GeSIG to a pre-exhibition morning session in the exhibitor's dining area. Philipp Neie (Schweitzer Fachinformation) welcomed the guests. Dr Thomas Mutschler (Thuringian University and State Library Jena) started the meeting by introducing the agenda from the librarian's point of view. Thomas Mutschler noted that the traditional idea of the library as an institution fixed to its own collection is being radically questioned today: Libraries are currently facing huge changes in the world of scholarly information – they have lost their previous monopolistic position and are no longer in control. Many libraries, especially in Germany, are responding to these challenges by promoting the Patron Driven Acquisition model. At the same time publishers are making use of the digital transformation by establishing new business models. In Germany, the discussion is focusing on Open Access including research data and negotiations for a nationwide consortia for the 'big three'.

¹ I would like to thank Dr Danny Kingsley (University of Cambridge) who provided me for the text with follow-up and notes of the meeting.

“If librarians won’t do it publishers will!”

There is especially a big question around research data. Juliane Ritt (Springer Nature) noted that Springer Nature is publishing both the data itself and data journals. In France there is now a law that requires the data underpinning research to be published. Also text and data mining is permitted using this data. There are different types of research data – it is not standardized in the way published articles are (as pdfs generated from Word or LaTeX) as representatives from publishers and libraries confirmed. Publication of research data and Open Access are opening the door for a closer relationship between the publisher and the researcher as the ensuing discussion showed. Greta Boonen (Wiley) told the group that there is a trend towards working directly with authors and readers to help meet these requirements. If librarians won’t do it publishers will.

Then the discussion focused on the Open Access issue. Juliane Ritt and Dagmar Laging (Springer Nature) discussed a study on the usage of Open Access articles versus subscription articles. Springer Nature took a snapshot and looked at OA and non-OA in the same journals. It was clear that Open Access articles are more downloaded by non-affiliated users. They looked across the disciplines and at consortium deals across a broad range. Looking at non licensed users over half of the downloads were attributed to them.

“We shouldn’t kill hybrid.”

The libraries side spoke up for maintaining the hybrid model. Generally authors don’t care about open access. They only chose a journal because of the relevance of the journal, Dr Danny Kingsley (University of Cambridge) argued: If authors prefer to publish in hybrid journals libraries shouldn’t prevent them – there is a global aspect to this and the world of research is not there yet. So going completely Open Access at the moment is not possible. Publishers provide a filter – by offering the service, the brand and the reputation of the journal. Therefore the price for the Article Processing Charge (APC) is the result of the value of the journal, argued Juliane Ritt. A great difference can be seen between STM and HSS APC prices.

The discussion moved to the question of the Finch Report and how it recommended Gold Open Access in the UK by supporting hybrid Open Access as a means to transition to fully Open Access model. Thomas Mutschler noted that German research organizations are promoting a similar path in the context of the OA2020 campaign which started in March this year. However, in the UK three and a half years after the start of the RCUK policy there is no indication that publishers are moving away from hybrid. Why would they? A notable exception in the UK is Springer’s Compact deal.

Danny Kingsley noted that APCs are often calculated on the basis of what it would cost to run a journal as an entirely Open Access journal. But the cost of making a particular article Open Access is not that high while there is still an income stream from the subscription. There was a discussion about a graduated APC – which started off small while take-up was low and increased in proportion to the percentage of the journal that was available Open Access with the journal flipping entirely at a point (say 60% of the journal is Open Access). At that point a full APC could be charged. Greta Boonen said that there have been thoughts about reducing subscriptions as well, although we would still need offsets because there are still costs at the production end for big research institutions.

“We can’t change as quickly as they would like.”

Another aspect of the talk was devoted to Open Access as a business model. From the publishers point of view there is the need for a certain volume of work before it is worthwhile to change back-end systems. Ben Ashcroft (De Gruyter) noted that currently the volume is low enough that it is manageable to ‘fiddle’ the process, but once it reached a certain point this would not be workable any more: The funding policies are pushing us on things we can’t change as quickly as they would like, Ben Ashcroft said. Looked at the phenomenon Open Access globally it is not happening everywhere – it is rather a northern European phenomenon. Until it takes hold in the U.S. and China where the vast bulk of research is being generated, publishers have to straddle both systems: print, electronic and Open Access.

Being asked whether processing APC’s could be the base for a new business model for subscription agencies Luke Davies (EBSCO) stated that their business was volume-driven, so they are not in the game yet: You need someone to pay to develop a new system. Focusing on the situation in Germany – where negotiations for a national consortium with the ‘big three’ are on the agenda – subscription agents are worried about being shut out. They are watching these developments with concern, warning against the economic consequences of these deals. Maybe the market effect is undervalued: In the value chain people are looking for high value – filtering to give reputation/recognition in the sense of ‘helping me in my personal goals’.

“The world of scientific information has become more colourful.”

Summoning up the discussion Philipp Neie asked if anyone has yet seen the ideal process – where all participants in the information supply chain have their function, where the functions are clearly providing what is needed, where librarians and publishers provide information in a way readers can find things. Maybe SciHub fulfills an obvious need, the librarians side argued sarcastically. Finally the discussion participants agreed that there are a lot of different versions of Open

Access/Electronic Publishing: The world of scientific information has become more colourful.

The GeSIG meeting provided a good chance for all participants in the discussion to leave the silos behind and to enter into dialogue. Also, GeSIG benefited from exchanging experiences and opinions across the borders. It provided a good chance to tune into this year's Bookfair. The GeSIG is looking forward continuing the format and welcoming guests in the next year.