How Scholarly Societies and Scholarly Disciplines will Change their Forms of Publication

James J. O’Donnell
Professor of Classics and Provost
Georgetown University (Washington DC)
and
The American Philological Association

Introduction
For over three hundred years, associations and societies of scholars and researchers have been among the most important organizations selecting, approving, and publishing the best work of their members. Many of the earliest journals were published by just such groups, such as the Royal Society in London. Today, many of these societies are challenged to think hard about how to adapt their publications to the new possibilities of the digital age. I will argue that when they think about their publications that way, they are asking the wrong questions and should think otherwise.

The contemporary landscape of learned societies and their publications range from the very large to the very small, from the international to the national to the local. No reliable listing of all the learned societies of the world can or could exist, precisely because the vehicle of association has been valuable in many ways for bringing together scholars and investigators and promoting inquiry and teaching. At one extreme, one could point to the American Chemical Society, very large, very powerful, and indeed often the focus of criticism for its journal prices and policies. But in the United States, we could point to the tiny “Sixteenth Century Society and Conference”, which has published the Sixteenth Century Journal for forty years, or the Society for Dance History Scholars. I know the Indian scene very badly indeed, but a brief inquiry has led me to admire the work of many associations focusing on research in areas of agriculture and food science, others emphasizing information technology, but also brought to my attention the Association of Theologically Trained Women in India, with thirty years’ history and 500 members. My view is that all of these groups, large and small, global or regional, have important work to do, work that deserves the good wishes of every member of the academic community.

Scholarly Societies and Publications Over the Years
And perhaps I should say something of my own interest in the subject, which brings me to this conference. I am a classicist and scholar of the history of the Roman empire and as such am a member of the American Philological Association, which has 3000 members in the United States, and is the most senior and important of the no fewer than 6 societies devoted to Greek and Roman studies just in the United States. I now serve as Vice President for Publications of the APA and as such am responsible for thinking about the future of the monographs and textbooks we publish, but noticeably also our journal, The Transactions of the American Philological Association, which has been published without interruption since our founding in 1869. At the same time, I serve on the Board of Trustees of the American Council of Learned Societies, which has 70 societies in the social sciences and humanities as its members. (Also in the US, the American Association for the Advancement of Science represents many more societies in the natural sciences of every kind.) My roles make me unusually sensitive to the challenges learned societies face and the way our publications demand our attention at the present moment.

American Philosophical Association: A Case Study
So let me make a case study of our publications in my society, the APA. I do so, however, with a good sense of the overall environment that comes from my work with the Council of Learned Societies, whose members discuss these issues at our meetings on a regular basis.

For 131 years, our journal, The Transactions of the American Philological Association which we call “TAPA”, was published in a single annual volume. It for many years consisted mainly of the papers delivered
at our annual meeting – thus it was called in those days the “Transactions and Proceedings” of the society. When I was young, I measured the dignity and seniority of my teachers by seeing the long row of brick red hard-covered volumes of the journal on their bookshelves. Being invited to give a paper at the annual meeting was an honor, and its inclusion in the annual volume made work of the highest quality known to the world of scholars. That was a good thing; but it was also a good thing that the existence and work of the association itself was given publicity by this form of publication. And over time, “peer review” or refereeing of the papers for the annual volume was introduced, to make sure that only those papers of the highest quality from the meeting were included. Scholars benefited from appearing in a distinguished journal; and the association benefited from having distinguished scholars appear in its journal. When the APA began its life in 1869, one of its missions was to make clear to European scholars that even the postcolonial Americas could indeed achieve scholarly work of significance, on a par with their “first world” elders and betters. It did so with great success.

Over time, the link between the papers of the annual conference and the papers of the journal loosened and finally broke. For one thing, the association and the conference grew so large that many more papers were given in one year than could be published in a single journal. Now there are often one or two papers per year from the annual meeting, but for the most part we function as a submission-based journal, doing traditional peer review.

In 2000, the annual row of red volumes was broken, as we moved from annual to semi-annual publication and from hard cover to soft. We did this for economic and academic reasons: our publisher was able to distribute the soft cover more cheaply, and our readers found that modern library practice made a semiannual soft cover volume more visible in the periodicals collections of libraries. At about the same time, we began to take advantage of electronic distribution as well, and here I will speak of money.

For 130 years, we paid for the journal by selling subscriptions. Members of the association receive their copy of the journal at no extra charge when they have paid their annual membership fee to belong, but in fact by recent times, the full cost of printing and distributing the journal was being met by the subscriptions taken by institutions and libraries. It all felt magical, somehow, that we had a journal we could publish that cost us nothing to publish beyond what others gave us to pay for it. (Those costs are artificially kept low, of course, because in the academic way both authors, editors, and peer reviewers contribute their time and effort at no cost in dollars. Only the most senior editor receives a modest stipend.)

When electronic publication became a possibility we were at first at a loss until more magical intervention occurred. First, the not-for-profit journal storage project, JSTOR, offered to digitize our 130 or so volumes of history at no charge to us and to make them available to subscribers around the world. Then we linked our efforts with those of Johns Hopkins University Press and its Project MUSE. The Press now publishes the new issues of the journal in both paper and electronic form and at the same time manages our collection of membership fees and subscriptions. Overnight, our journal, all the way back to 1869, was available electronically to academics in many countries.

Many more readers could now see and read our journal. Older issues and articles were read more often and more attentively, and many more scholars could now see our newest work in a timely way. We always had a small number of hundreds of institutions that directly subscribed to our paper journal; but today in 2009, we find that over two thousand institutions now have access to our current issues through Project MUSE. If we think about our ambition to make our scholarly work better known and more accessible, this is a huge success.

And there is money involved. With both JSTOR and MUSE, we receive a share of royaltiess for every subscription and use. The total numbers are small in comparison to other larger societies, I am sure, but we now receive an annual amount of money just from JSTOR and MUSE equal to what we had received from all our institutional subscribers in the past – and those subscribers almost all still subscribe in order to receive the paper copy of the journal.

The Challenge
So for now, we seem to be in a magically benevolent world, where things have gotten easier for us, but where we have had to do almost nothing to earn that blessing. But alas, I do not really believe in magically benevolent worlds, and I see challenges looming. Our business situation is obviously unstable—for if institutions give up the paper copy, we will lose the traditional revenue; to be sure, the new environment is giving us new revenue that makes up for what we might lose. The real risk is that we have come to think of the new revenue as a kind of “free money” that we can use for our society’s other needs and if we ever need it to pay the actual editorial costs of the journal, we will be forced to make hard choices about how these dollars are spent.

And there we are in a typical situation. Many, many learned societies have discovered that their publications can be a revenue source. With 3000 members and a full-time staff of only three people, we know that the APA tries to do more for its members and its profession than we can afford to do. A few dollars extra from publications are very welcome and helpful. Many larger societies with much larger subscription lists (and sometimes with many more journals published by one society) have come to depend on subscription revenues to pay for essential activities of the society.
And there is the risk. For there are many people who still hope and believe that we can live in a magically benevolent world, one in which the products of scholarly investigation can be made freely available to all readers in all continents through the practice generally called “open access”. Short of that, there is a growing expectation that journal access will be priced at the lowest possible level and that publishers—whether commercial or society-based—will not seek revenues from journals beyond what is required to make the journals themselves function.

More than that, we have a population of scholars who want us to innovate more ambitiously. Can we as a society find a way to make “open access” a reality much more broadly in our particular profession? Can we use preprint servers and independent repositories in institutions and independent peer review to make it easier for the best work to be approved and made known more quickly and to wider audiences? Can we innovate with the technology of publication itself and include more illustrations, animations, media clips, and databases in what we publish? Nothing about our arrangement now with Project MUSE lets us think really beyond the flat PDF file with the traditional written text of an article.

So let me sum up the pressures: (1) costs increase, even for small journals; (2) the move to electronic distribution has temporarily produced a bulge in revenue; but (3) that bulge will shrink as institutions migrate away from print subscriptions; and (4) the demand to reduce price to zero or nearly zero is strongly heard; whereas, (5) the desire to enhance quality in some potentially expensive ways is also strong. And I will add one more challenge: with an abundance of publishing outlets, it is increasingly difficult for societies to be certain that their journals are in fact getting the best work of the best scholars, young and old. A journal that isn’t quite doing the best work it could may reasonably ask whether it should continue at all, whatever traditional expectations may be.

My question to myself, but also to you in my audience, is something like this: “what shall we do about this publishing problem?” But even as I ask the question that way, I realize that the problem is not one that is just about publication, technology, and costs. Rather it is a problem for learned societies themselves.

**Technology: The Road Ahead?**

For three hundred years, learned societies used current technology to support publication because that was the best way to support the fundamental purposes of the society. What I see now is a risk that we will become so preoccupied with questions of technology and cost that we will fail to address the larger question of the goals of scholarly association. Let me speak of them for a minute.

Scholars gather in disciplinary clusters because they believe strongly in the importance and value of the work they share. The notion of “discipline” arises from the common rules, explicit and implicit, that those who work in a field share, but inevitably the grouping of scholars creates opportunities for debate and innovation as well. Publication in academe has several functions secondary to the work itself. It provides reliable information about the advance of scholarship on which other specialists can build; it makes members of the discipline aware of the range and quality of work and workers in the field; and it makes it possible for the discipline to contribute to a larger world of academic and scientific discourse. To treat publication as important in itself is a mistake; and to treat the current business models, technological possibilities, and social issues surrounding publication as defining the set of problems to be solved only makes the mistake worse. What I do not see many learned societies yet doing is this: to take themselves and their fundamental concerns seriously, to look again at their highest and most important goals, and then and only then ask how publication can assist those goals.

So what should societies think of? **First,** dissemination of the highest quality work to a broad audience is important for the good of the society itself. “Outreach” is the American jargon term for this kind of publication, and every discipline and society that thinks its work important should be doing this, in order to sustain its own position in the intellectual community. **Second,** in a volatile and fast-moving environment, supporting and encouraging the best work that takes responsible advantage of new technologies for doing and communicating research is a high priority, and one that not every scholar working alone or within a traditional institution is going to be able to think about and do for him or herself. **Third,** societies need to maintain the sense of community within the discipline, which means making sure that younger scholars are ‘showcased’ and that the community of senior scholars remains in conversation with each other, even as all of them have many distracting opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary work and publication. Societies are the place where fundamentals are thought about and maintained.

**So what are some things that societies can and should do?**

**First,** recognize that the thing a learned society can do best is identify good scholarly work. That is our ‘core competency’. Everything else about publication is secondary and requires skills somewhere away from the core of what we do. Designing systems within learned societies that bring together senior scholars and innovative scholars to evaluate the work of their colleagues is the thing they can do best and must do if the society is to sustain its value.

**Second,** recognize that the ability to connect the intellectual work of the society with the best new technologies of investigation and communication is a further task that only the society can evaluate.

**Third,** recognize that the current business model—treatment of the current business model, technological possibilities, and social issues surrounding publication as defining the set of problems to be solved only makes the mistake worse. What I do not see many learned societies yet doing is this: to take themselves and their fundamental concerns seriously, to look again at their highest and most important goals, and then and only then ask how publication can assist those goals.

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Third, recognize that if a society does not take responsibility for making the excellence of its work known to a large academic, indeed a larger societal community, nobody else is likely to do so. Many societies have little experience with this task.

Validate, innovate, and communicate: those are the things a society should be doing.

How to go forward?
First, evaluate and innovate in the domain of peer review. The traditional publishing peer review that consists of sending an article to 2 or 3 other scholars to comment upon, with little sense of time pressure, privately, is seriously flawed and depends too heavily on the willingness of scholars to participate. What vehicles can be found for bringing together scholars around a common purpose and exposing what they do to evaluation of its own? (One topic gaining attention in American academic circles now is the way in which senior scholars are increasingly exempted from peer review—not for a bad reason, but because they receive so many invitations to speak and publish in non-reviewed settings, that they have no time or incentive to submit articles to traditional journals.) The place and form of publication are actually of secondary importance. Could we imagine a society that suspended publication of a journal per se but focused on a panel of reviewers who evaluated and recognized the best articles published by members wherever they should appear? A society’s web page that contained links to twenty of the best articles published this year by its members might well do more for the discipline than one that spent proportionally more effort on soliciting and editing twenty articles of its own.

Second, promote the work of the best scholars to the widest audience. The society for a major discipline need not publish an “outreach” periodical, but should be thinking of ways to support the visibility of the best work of the best scholars through prizes, through cooperation with other societies and institutions, and through innovative use of internet social media—blogs, Twitter, and the like.

Third, be particularly attentive to the work of junior scholars, promoting the best and encouraging improvement. A traditional technique is the publication of a journal prestigious enough for the most senior scholars but still open to good work from junior scholars. As senior scholars are drawn away from traditional peer reviewed journals, how can societies feature and support the work of the young most effectively?

The Dilemma
My own view is that these tasks are all best imagined not as the sole responsibility of the society, but as elements of partnership. Universities and research institutes have a similar interest in advancing the best work of their scholars and of making sure that it is subjected to the most diligent peer review. The ‘institutional repository’ is the current language for the practice of gathering material and making it available at the scholar’s home institution. Perhaps in five or ten years, more of those repositories will be outsourced as to technology (i.e., placing papers on servers cheaply and efficiently maintained by someone else), but it is clear that universities in particular have such an interest in promoting the work of their scholars that some form of engagement is possible and desirable. If the university provides the repository, then it becomes easier for the learned society to provide the peer review, and all parties are advantaged.

And here is where we need particularly the librarians. For the risk of such a distributed system is chaos—too many articles in too many places, with too many voices clamoring for attention. My view is that libraries and librarians should not be in the business of promoting and disseminating scholarship so much as they should still be helping organize and evaluate and make known what is available. Distributed systems of hosting high-quality materials will require design of effective metadata and metadata tools to enable users to find what they are looking for. When I want to publish, I should go to a publisher; but when I want to find what is published, I should rely on a library. I may rely on that library only by using automated tools that the library has created to sort and make easy access to good work, but the expertise that can imagine those tools and create them in partnership with technologists is exactly what we will find we need most.

Conclusion
So to conclude, my view is that the challenges of publishing for learned societies are not publishing challenges so much as identity challenges. Societies that decide what they most need to do in order to achieve their missions will be in much better positions than they are now to advance their goals. Whether and how the traditional publishing industry will be a necessary or useful ally in that business seems to me to be an open question, but the possibilities for alliance between those societies and librarians seem to me full of great potential for advancing the common interest of all scholars both in being able to disseminate their own work and at the same time in being able to identify and gain access to the work of others that they need and want.

Libraries and societies have not historically worked closely together in the way I propose. What I am suggesting is that by working together, the common aims of both communities may be more easily and more economically attained. And that would be good for scholars everywhere and for the larger societies we serve.