



Editorial

Can Scholarly Communication be Evidence Based?

Denise Koufogiannakis

Editor-in-Chief

Collections & Acquisitions Coordinator, University of Alberta Libraries

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Email: denise.koufogiannakis@ualberta.ca

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This issue of *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* includes three papers from the Evidence Based Scholarly Communication Conference (EBSCC) that took place in March 2010ⁱ. Kroth, Philips and Eldredge have written a commentary that gives an overview of the conference, and introduces us to the research papers that were presented. As well, two research presentations from the conference appear in this issue, an article by Donahue about a potential new method of communicating between scholars, and a paper by Gilliland in our *Using Evidence in Practice* section, detailing a library's Open Access Day preparations.

Kroth, Philips and Eldredge note that "The EBSCC brought together librarians and information specialists to share evidence-based strategies for developing effective local scholarly communication support and training and, hopefully, form new coalitions to address this topic at a local and national level." (p 108). This conference focused on translational medicine, and looked at how to promote new methods of scholarly communication, partially through the inclusion of research papers at the conference.

The inclusion of these articles and the evidence based focus of the EBSCC conference, made me ask myself, can scholarly communication be evidence based? At its core, scholarly communication is anything but a scientific issue. It is charged with emotion; from authors, publishers, librarians and others involved in the business of publishing. The recent shift to look at new models of scholarly communication has been a threat to many of the established models and sparked much debate in the academic world, especially in relation to open access. In her 2006 *EBLIP* commentary on evidence based practice and open access, Morrison notes, "Open Access and evidence based librarianship are a natural combination" (p. 49), and outlines her perspective on many of the reasons why. Debate continues to rage, however, regarding how authors should disseminate their work, the role of research funding bodies that use public funds, the added value brought to the work by publishers, the role of peer reviewers, the economics of various models, and simply what works best.

Research has been done on many of these issuesⁱⁱ and much of that work has then been

critically appraised and debated post-publication on mailing listsⁱⁱⁱ and social networking media such as blogs.^{iv} The *BMJ* is one scholarly publication that has committed itself to becoming an “evidence based publisher” and is carrying out research on aspects of scholarly publishing to help guide their processes (Schroter, n.d.). Research on scholarly communication is a hot topic indeed; and for librarians, an area of information overload if there ever was one. How to sort out the good from the bad; the research that is high quality from that which is biased?

At this point in time, it is my view that the research does not yet provide a definitive answer for how libraries should approach new models of scholarly communication. We are in the middle of a debate, in the middle of a surge of research, and an ever-changing lens in which we view and approach this topic. But evidence based practice has always been about more than just research – it considers what is needed by our users, and is guided by our professional judgement. Putting those elements together allows us to sort through the research and make informed decisions about our approach to collections, and how we do liaison work. For anyone looking for a research idea, there are certainly a couple of systematic reviews possible on these issues that would benefit practitioners immensely.

The decision to start *EBLIP* was not an evidence based one. It was based in a desire to give the topic a home for discussion, and that in order to facilitate discussion, the widest audience possible must be reached. Hence, barriers such as cost needed to be reduced, and the decision to be open access was made. This was a decision based on principles of access, sharing and broad communication. And so far it has worked, with a parade of volunteers who contribute their time, energy and talents. It was really about taking a chance on something that seemed worthwhile, but which the community of LIS professionals would determine the worth of by their contribution. That contribution has exceeded expectations, both from the perspective of submissions received, and the ever-increasing

number of volunteers who inspect and polish the content to make it shine. So, *EBLIP* is a case where open access has worked. It is one drop in the ocean of conflicting evidence on the topic.

My conclusion, then, is not straightforward. Decisions around scholarly communication can be evidence based, but the political, personal, economic, and social factors all make the issue a complicated one. This seems to be an area where the best research is not necessarily the main concern. Ensuring that quality research remains a part of the conversation is what journals such as this one can do to help provide answers, but in the end those who contribute intellectual content to the process, and those who spend money to enable access to that content for their communities, will ultimately decide what happens. I hope research evidence will be part of that determination.

References

- Morrison, H. (2006). Evidence based librarianship and open access. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 1(2), 46-50. Retrieved from <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/article/view/49/117>
- Schroter, Sara. (n.d.) *The BMJ's ongoing programme of editorial research*. Retrieved November 5, 2010, from <http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/about-bmj/evidence-based-publishing>

ⁱ Evidence-based scholarly communications conference: Empowering information professionals to unlock translational research for our communities. <http://hsc.unm.edu/library/ebsconference/index.shtml>

ⁱⁱ Two sources noting recent research are the monthly SPARC Open Access Newsletter which emphasizes open access <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/>; and Charles W. Bailey, Jr. produces a yearly bibliography on scholarly electronic

publishing <http://www.digital-scholarship.org/sep/annual/annual.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Liblicense-L is one example of a mailing list with heavy discussion of scholarly communication issues, with contributions from a variety of perspectives.

^{iv} As examples, see ,

<http://poeticeconomics.blogspot.com/>,

<http://oalibrarian.blogspot.com/>,

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fof/>,

<http://blogs.plos.org/mfenner/>,